



AUTHENTIC *Science* FICTION

The **PLASTIC
PERIL**
by Roy Sheldon

INSIDE!

**FORREST J. ACKERMAN
WRITES FROM AMERICA**

1/6
MONTHLY
No. 25

One week ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £232 10s.
Please send two more.—B.C., Tredegar, S. Wales.
Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book," 1931.



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AS MATCHMAKER

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AUTHENTIC

Science
FICTION

NUMBER TWENTY-FIVE

(Technical Editor: H. J. Campbell, F.C.S., F.R.H.S., M.S.C.I., F.B.I.S.)

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short-or long?

Once again we offer you a story by Roy Sheldon, who is highly placed in popularity both in *Authentic* and in our *Panther Book* science-fiction series. This time those characters you like so well, Shiny Spear and Dirk Manners, come up against something very peculiar indeed on a very peculiar planet. A large number of readers say they are very keen on stories by Sheldon and others, that take them far away onto unknown worlds, with alien conditions and alien creatures. We shall try to keep up the supply of such stories.

★

We should like to mention here, for the benefit of interested readers, that there is now a checklist of British science fiction available. Part One is already on sale by the Nor'West Science Fantasy Club, 47 Alldis Street, Woodmoor, Stockport, at 2/6. It contains details of all magazines printed or reprinted in this country. Other issues will follow and we will give details as they become available.

★

Another recent fan publication we can recommend is the Space Patrol Official Handbook, issued at 1/6 by Denis Gifford at Space Patrol Headquarters, 16, Sydenham Park, London, S.E.26. The handbook contains a Membership Certificate, an Interplanetary Passport, Spacecraft Recognition, details of space suits, and a host



of other interesting data on space topics. There is even a glossary of interplanetary languages—English, Martian, Venusian and Plutonian. Fully illustrated, the handbook is *almost* as good a buy for 1/6 as is *Authentic*.

★

Occasionally, readers have asked us why we do not run short stories instead of novels. Assuming that there are many more who think this way but do not write in, we will give an explanation here. All the time we are trying to make *Authentic* an expression of readers' wants and views—as gathered from their letters. We know that only a fraction of our readers write to us, but this, it seems to us, is the only scientific method of doing the job. Whims, emotions and philosophising have no foundation in material evidence—the raw material of science. So we base our policies on what you, the reader, tells us. (Incidentally, we could do much better if ten times as many readers wrote in their views. What about it?)

Accordingly, we can show that of the letters dealing with this question of story-length, over 80 per cent. want the long novel; the short story is obtainable elsewhere. So, we go on publishing novels. We will continue to do so until we get more than 50 per cent. of letters asking for shorts. If you want them, you'll have to ask for them *en masse*.

And that goes for all our features. Naturally, when we get a new idea, we have to try it out. Sometimes it fails and we drop it. Other times it succeeds and we keep it. The criterion in each case is what readers tell us.

EDITOR

Forrest J. Ackerman

writes from America . . .

1942: As editor of an army newspaper I interview film actor John Payne when he joins the Services, learn he is a Merritt fan, has a collection of sf books he's proud of, has even written fantastic fiction himself! I lend him a copy of *Odd John* and arrange for him to visit the Los Angeles club.

1949: I find myself sitting next to Gloria de Haven and John Payne at a showing of the fantasy film, "Portrait of Jennie," and renew acquaintance with John. A few days later he flies to New York, reading a copy of *World of Null-A* I have lent him.

1951: Bump into John Payne at a series of lectures by L. Ron Hubbard and A. E. van Vogt.

1952: The other night at the preview of his latest picture I saw John Payne carrying the latest copy of *Authentic Science Fiction*! Lex (Tarzan) Barker was there, too. Had a talk with John, who's recently had talks with Philip Wylie and George Pal. Asked him for a statement for *ASfM* readers on what were the prospects for his making a scientific film. "I'm pushing it," he replied. "I'm pushing it!"

★

Rip Van Ronkel, who co-scripted "Destination Moon,"



dropped in to see me the other day, as a result of which we've put our heads together to create a radio series to be called "Destination Future" or something similar.

★

Two representatives from the ABC radio network visited me in my home the other evening. With them they brought a thousand dollars' worth of equipment and an hour's worth of sonotapes, which carried an interview on them between Frank Scully and a woman with the strangest story you ever heard. It featured a ten-mile Mother Ship (base for the flying-saucers and their little green pikets) said to be hovering over San Diego, the city 125 miles from L.A. where two weeks from the day I write this a three-day, State-wide science fiction conference will be held. Watch my column after next for details of this San Diego Fiesta!

★

John Scott Campbell recently gave me an MS. called *The Living Buddha*, which IF magazine bought. Now Campbell just called me that he's meeting this afternoon the producer with whom I got him together, who's interested in turning out *The Living Buddha* as a three-dimensional film!

★

Cecil B. de Mille's son, Richard, has turned his hand to science fiction writing, and I've just made his first sale for him: *Safety Valve to Astounding*.

Cheerio! I'm off for a 3,000-mile round-trip to the capital of Mexico to investigate the Spanish situation.

44J

projectiles (1)

GOOD READING

I have just finished reading four copies of your wonderful magazine and take this opportunity of thanking you for such good reading. I have read Nos. 16 to 19 and liked them so much that I immediately sat down and wrote this letter. Keep up the good work.

J. R. JOHNSON,
174 Melbourne St.,
Lower Nth. Adelaide,
South Australia.

Please you liked them, Mr. Johnson. By now you should have had our personal-reply letter. We hope to hear from you again.

LEAPS AND BOUNDS

In your past few issues, the stories, in my opinion, have increased by leaps and bounds in quality. I am looking forward to a good year of reading *ASFm*.

R. B. JOHNSON,
68, Dover St.,
Glasgow, C.3.

RATING

Your later issues have improved considerably. *Space Warp* was good. *Earth Our New Eden* was excellent. *Alien Impact* was first class. And now—*Mice or Machines*. I can't really describe it! It dealt with an unusual and delicate subject. (I can imagine hordes of infuriated females writing nasty letters to what used to be their favourite magazine!) I enjoyed the book immensely. Nothing from John J. Deegan for some months—I hope he's preparing something that will eclipse every

issue so far—he's quite capable of it.

J. ASHCROFT,
Manor House Farm,
Glalsall, Lincs.

Many thanks for those kind words, Mr. Ashcroft. We like to have the issues rated like this. So you like J.I.D.? Well, what did you think of *The Singing Spheres*? (No nasty letters from the ladies yet. Nothing to say about *Mice or Machines*, girls?)

GOOD AUTHOR

I think you have picked a good author in E. C. Tubb. His *Alien Impact* was good. I think you must get Jon J. Deegan to write a few more stories for you; he has the nice habit of telling a good story with a lot of action to it, unlike some of your books I have read. Please don't think I am being hard on your periodical; I think it is first class, but you want to get more variety in your authors. Nos. 15 17, 18 and 19 were pretty low in standard. Perhaps 20 wasn't as good as you could get by any means.

M. G. CAMBIER,
Millfield,
Street, Somerset.

A lot—repeat lot—of people disagree with you about those numbers, Mr. Cambier. Several of them have been classed as the best we have ever put out. Conflicting views such as these convince us that we are getting variety in our stories. Science fiction has to suit a large and varied community: our stories must vary in response. However, write again, please.

THE PLASTIC PERIL

By Roy Sheldon

CHAPTER ONE

A Job At Last

THE big ship moved through deep space without a shudder or tremor in her whole great bulk. Smoothly and silently she pushed her way farther into the uncharted regions of the Star System Perseus.

In all her eight storeys, and throughout her half-mile length, men were at work or play. Toiling or resting; talking, sleeping, eating, reading, thinking—they passed the time that was neither day nor night; leading their artificial lives in the manner of ants in a gigantic anthill.

On the third storey from the bottom, that is, from where the hatches opened, and about three hundred yards from the rear, where the jets purred quietly, was the Space Crew Bar. It was a blaze of light that was as near to daylight as modern science could make it. It hummed with the conversation of the dozens of space men seated at its cosy tables, and with the shrill giggles of waitresses. A speaker on the wall suddenly crackled into life.

"Marshal Spear and Major Manners report to C.O.'s office immediately, please. Repeat. Marshal Spear . . ."

Shiny Spear tipped his mug and stared its length at Dirk Manners. Manners raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips. "Well, well," he said. "So the Old Man wants us."

Spear set the mug down squarely. His sharp, solid features relaxed into a grin. The dark, sleek hair glistened under the lights, fell across one corner of his forehead and hid a tiny scar that had come Shiny's way in one of his numerous space battles. Automatically, the Marshal began to button the top of his tunic.

"Smarten up a bit, Dirk," Spear called. "Must show some respect for the Old Man!"

Major Manners, veteran navigator-cum-biologist-cum-

philosopher, companion to Spear in all his tribulations and successes, straightened the majorial tie with its bright crown insignia. He ran limp and gentle hands over his golden hair, glanced at his finger nails.

Spear regarded him with a wry smile. The Marshal never ceased to be amused at Manners' titivating rituals, which were apt to give the impression that the major was a bit of a softy. Strangers noting his preoccupation with his appearance would never suspect that Manners had of necessity killed dozens of aliens in cold-blooded self-defence—and that he once sent a whole planet into fragmentary oblivion in order to protect his native Earth. Spear knew that when trouble threatened Manners contemplated other things than his finger-nails—while outwardly appearing, as he usually did, slightly bored with the whole thing.

"Smart enough?" Manners queried, casting a searching glance at Spear's crumpled uniform and dulled insignia.

Spear laughed. "An aide to be proud of, Dirk. And here am I making you ashamed of my dowdy looks!"

Manners lifted his eyes from the uniform and let them rove over Spear's face. The firm chin was stubbly with yesterday's growth of beard. There was a smear or two of oil on the forehead—signs that Spear had recently been tinkering about in the power room, as no Marshal should. Only the black hair was tidy—and that only because Spear found it less troublesome if he stuck it down firmly with a good strong hair cream.

But Manners, the philosopher at heart, looked beyond the dirt and untidiness. He saw Spear as he had looked when the two of them were threatened by gigantic cacti at the Universe's hub; saw him dealing with swollen crustaceans on Themis, Saturn's phantom moon; saw him again in the quiet of his untidy home, his wife Gwynne forming a pleasant part of the background playing with their son. Manners remembered Shiny's rise to his present rank—and his insistence on Manners being raised with him so that they could be together.

The major pulled a face. "I don't know why I let myself be seen around with you, Shiny. I'm only thankful my mother doesn't know about this. Well, are we going to keep the Old Man waiting?"

He stood up, smiling. Spear also got to his feet, stretched like a panther waking from a snooze, and dropped a ticket on the table for the drinks. The amount would be deducted from his pay.

"These are on me, Dirk," Spear said. Manners didn't argue. Both of them knew that Manners couldn't have paid for the drinks if he had wanted to; his pay was overdrawn already through taking the girls out so much.

They moved across to the exit, Manners stopping on the way to have a laughing word with some of the waitresses. Shiny grimaced when they giggled. He moved off and waited for Dirk at the door. When the navigator finally arrived Spear said:

"There must be something wrong with your glands, Dirk. How you can stand those giggling idiots, I don't know. They'd make me sick!"

Manners grinned. "They make me sick, too, but I like it! Girls are the only creatures who can make me see the best in all classes of people."

"That's because you've got a prejudiced eye!" Shiny claimed as they stepped out into the corridor. "Try using it on the C.O."

They crossed the corridor and stepped through the alcove that led to the Rail. Right down the length of the ship the Rail ran, with little side loops at intervals where cars could pull in to let another by.

Spear and Manners walked to the nearest loop and found an empty car. Climbing in, they set it going by push-button. The rubber-tyred car rolled along smoothly past other alcoves leading off to games rooms, cinemas, theatres, swimming pools, restaurants and all the amenities of a small town. Once or twice they pulled in to a loop while a car from the opposite direction passed them. There were no rules of the Rail. Traffic managed quite happily by common sense and unselfishness.

When the car reached the centre of the ship, Spear ran it into a loop. The two men climbed out and made their way to the lifts through an alcove.

"Third storey," Spear said into the grid beside a lift that was not being used. The green light on the panel to one side went out and a red one came on—other people would

know the lift was engaged. Within seconds the lift stopped in front of them.

Once inside the automatic doors, Spear waited for them to close and then said "Eighth storey" into the grid on the wall. The mechanism was set at non-emergency level, so the cage rose slowly and smoothly. In emergencies it could cover the distance in a couple of seconds—the occupants being suitably prepared.

"What d'you suppose the Old Man wants?" Manners queried as he lolled against the padded back of the cage.

Spear was stamping up and down impatiently, irked at the slowness of the lift. "I hope to God it's a job at last!" he clipped. "You may be happy with anthropology, but I'm plain bored with it. The sooner we get off into space the better. What's the good of being in Research Group if we don't do any researching?"

Manners smiled lazily. "You were the one who agitated to leave the Patrol," he reminded Spear. "All the time you were on at them to shift you into this mob; now you're here, you don't like."

"I do like it!" Spear snapped. "At least I like it when there's something to be done. I don't like just cruising around like a millionaire idling on his yacht."

Manners grinned. "If you were Mohammed it might be different. I know a Marshal is an exalted rank, but you still can't have the mountain brought to you, you know."

"What the blazes are you blathering about mountains for?" Spear demanded. "Who's talking about mountains?"

"A classical allusion," Manners explained. "Never mind about it. Point is, if you want to do research, you have to go where there's research to be done. And that's a good many light years away from Earth. And *that* takes time."

The lift came to a stop. As Spear passed through the door he looked over his shoulder at Manners. "I know all about that, navigator man. But why can't we be given something interesting to do meanwhile?—instead of this damned anthropology!"

The nicknamed 'Heads' on the eighth storey had assigned Spear and Manners and a few others to attend classes in comparative anthropology during the outward trip to Perseus. The idea, apparently, was to prevent the officers suc-

cumbing to boredom and to advance their education at the same time. In Spear's case they had succeeded only in increasing his boredom, without adding one jot to his education—the lectures passed completely over his head, whether he was awake or asleep during them—and the practical work left him completely unimpressed.

Manners laughed heartily at Spear's outburst. The major followed Spear through into the plushly appointed corridor used by the Heads talking all the while.

"Anthropology is a very interesting subject—to anyone who has a mind capable of assimilating logical facts in a logical pattern. The elementary stages, I agree, are not too alluring—dealing as they do with Terrestrial races only. But once you start the comparative anthropology of the planetary systems, the whole thing becomes like magic . . ."

Spear had stopped. He now stood facing Manners, legs astride, arms folded on his chest. Manners ignored the defiant stance, and continued.

" . . . It was a stroke of genius to broaden the scope of conventional anthropology so as to include beings that are anatomically dissimilar to man, but psychologically his equal or near-equal. Of course, it's rather murdering etymology to go on calling it anthropology, but that's only a matter for pedants. Weren't you absolutely carried away when we were doing comparative chemical anthropology and found that a basic living and thinking pattern could be found among widely differing chemical groups of beings?"

Spear answered shortly. "No, I was not."

"Then you should have been," Manners admonished. "These things may come in very useful one day when we're out on an unknown planet and come across something that isn't a bit like man to look at, but which thinks the way he does—dangerous thoughts, too, sometimes."

Spear smiled sarcastically. "Just so long as I have you with me, Professor, to hobnob with these precocious blobs of chemicals, I shan't worry. In the meantime, I'm more interested in engines that'll get us off such a planet before your intelligent jellyfish can turn their dangerous thoughts into more dangerous actions."

Manners suddenly relaxed his pedantic pose and clapped Spear on the shoulder. "Okay," he grinned. "While we're

together we'll be all right." He wagged a reproving finger at his Chief. "But if ever we're separated, you've got an awful lot of mugging up to do on anthropology, botany, zoology, physiology, entomology—"

"My dear old lad," Spear broke in. "If ever we're separated, I shall retire to my little Love Nest and spend the rest of my life contemplating the follies of mechanically-minded Marshals! Now, let's not keep the Old Man waiting any longer. The poor fellow is probably biting his nails down to the elbows waiting for us."

They strode smartly down the corridor. The door of the Old Man's office carried a tablet announcing: *Commander Kreg Kalep, Director of Research, Commanding Officer Military Attachments*. Spear pressed the call button and spoke his name and Manners' into the grid.

A reedy voice came over the speaker. "Come in, come in. Come in!"

Responding to the instruction, both men passed inside the Director's office. There was no ante-room and no secretary. Kreg Kalep was one of the old-fashioned school of individualists. Also, being a biologist who didn't believe in the use of drugs, he was almost completely bald.

A ring of greying hair ran from temple to temple round the back of his head. The face was shiny-skinned and small, with a tiny nose and a tiny mouth. Only the eyebrows were large and bushy, meeting across the nose as though trying to make up for the lack of other hair.

Commander Kalep's hands rested on his desk, the fingers trembling slightly, the veins standing out blue and strong on the backs. One hand lifted, pointing to chairs.

Spear and Manners pulled them down from the walls and seated themselves before the Old Man's desk. For some seconds he stared at them without speaking, without answering their formal greeting. Then he seemed to wake from a trance.

"Oh, yes, yes. I am well, gentlemen. Very well, thank you. And you?"

He didn't wait for their reply, but darted off on another subject. Manners glanced at the veins and wondered if the Old Man were really as well as he claimed. The poor fellow knew that there was a junior on board all trained

to step into his place should anything happen to him. Not a comforting thought to a man whose lifetime had been spent in research; to a man whose hands trembled and whose veins stood out blue and strong . . .

"Ah, yes," Kalep said. "Umm. Now I expect you two are champing at the bit a little, eh? Heh, heh!" His reedy voice cackled in a travesty of mirth. "Well now, you'll be pleased to know I've got a job for you! No, no, don't thank me—let's not waste time. Time's precious you know," he told them, peering at them sharply through his pale-grey eyes. "Yes, indeed. Precious. Now then, this job I've got for you. I want you to prepare for a trip in the scooter. Er—mineral research this time. Take all the gear you can and let me have a report on the suitability of the planet for mining. All right? Good. No, don't thank me. That's all right. Just let me have that report."

The Commander turned away as if the whole thing was over, and began rummaging among some papers piled on his desk. Spear glanced sideways at Manners, raised his eyebrows. Manners coughed and crossed his legs the other way.

Kalep looked up, blinked and wrinkled his brow as though puzzled as to the purpose of their presence. Manners took the initiative.

"Could we know a little about this planet we're to visit, Commander? It's nice to have some idea of what it's like. Also, what are we to call it in our report—has it been named yet?"

Kalep tapped his forehead repeatedly with a bony finger. "Planet, planet, planet," he said, with each tap. "Ah, yes. The one you're looking into for mineral resources. Yes, well, the exploration group marked it as being similar in size and mass to Earth, a little larger, perhaps, but nothing to speak of. Of course, Ex-G doesn't give us any data on atmosphere and so on—you'll have to discover that for yourself." He gave them another sharp glance. "Take your respirators in case it's poisonous. Can't afford to lose good men through carelessness. No, indeed."

Again Spear glanced at Manners. This was the first time they'd seen the Commander at work. Previously they'd only met him at dinners and other social occasions—at which he

had seemed a little at sea. They had put it down to his academic mind. But here he was instructing them in the most elementary precautions that everyone learned in his first year at Spacetech.

Manners ignored Spear's glance, kept his gaze on the Commander and plied more questions.

"It's part of a large planetary system, is it?" he asked.

Kalep shrugged. "Not very large, as such systems go. It's the smaller of two planets circling Algol—they're not at the same orbital distance, of course—That would be unstable. You have to have at least three bodies in a—"

Manners risked an interruption to avoid another lecture on elementary astronomy. "And its name?" he queried.

"For the report, you know."

"It's name, ah, yes. We've called it Grisetette, because it's the smaller of two planets circling Algol, and they're both grey in appearance. Grisetette. Rather pretty, I think. Do you agree?" He fixed Manners with a piercing look that was a little unshaking.

"Yes, oh, yes," Manners replied. "Very pretty indeed. Isn't it, Marshal?"

The whole conversation had been given up by Spear long since as the unintelligible ravings of two academicians. The sudden question unnerved him, and he could only mumble a reply. As it happened, no one noticed.

"Could we take a look at Grisetette in the visi-screen?" Manners asked. "It's nice to see it at a distance first."

"Er—well, I'd rather you didn't, Major," the Commander surprised him by answering. "I don't want you to have any prejudices when you land."

CHAPTER TWO

Sealed Orders

THIS time, the Commander was very definite about closing the interview. Before Manners could comment on the surprising decision not to let them look through the visi-screen at Grisetette, Kalep nodded a sharp dismissal and rose from his desk. He walked across to the other side of the room and ignored the two spacemen, busying himself with a filing cabinet.

Once again Spear shrugged. He got to his feet and cast a short glance at the Commander. Then he turned away and moved towards the door.

"That seems to be that, Dirk," he said. "Let's go set up the scooter."

Manners was still staring at the Commander's back, a puzzled wrinkle on his forehead. He turned sharply as though dragging his thoughts from far away, and followed Spear out of the office.

In the corridor, he hesitated, made as if to turn back to the Commander's office, then seemed to change his mind. He hurried after Spear, who was now striding purposefully towards the lifts.

"A slightly rum do," Spear commented, as they stepped into the cage. "What's up with the Commander? D'you suppose he's gone down with space senility? Or do elderly biologists always carry on like that?"

Manners shook his head, while Spear called instructions to the audiosensory mechanism of the lift. "No," Manners replied. "No to the last two questions. As to the first one—what's wrong with Kalep—I don't know. A man in his position isn't usually the kind of man who cracks up suddenly. And yet . . . Oh, I don't know! The whole thing's so odd. I don't feel too happy about it, I can tell you."

Spear laughed. "You biologists never trust each other," he accused, "Always thinking the other one's got something up his sleeve."

Manners spoke firmly, not in his usual laconic tone. "I'm pretty darned sure Kalep's got something up his sleeve. Why wouldn't he let us use the visi-screen?"

The cage stopped. Struck by Manners' change of tone, Spear let the doors remain open while he turned to the navigator. "You really think there's something fishy about Grisette? Umm. Oh, well, I guess we'll be able to take a look at her on the scooter's screen. Let's go order mineral stuff."

The cage, as per instructions, had stopped at the second storey where all the storerooms were housed. On this storey there were two Rails—one for passengers, one for goods. Spear found a car on the passenger rail and the two men drove towards the rear of the ship, coming to a halt before the arched doorway of the mineralogy storeroom.

Leaving the car, they went inside the vast hall of a room, with its row upon row of specimen cases, each neatly docketed with the name, source and discoverer of the mineral. Specimens came from the planetary systems of half a dozen major stars—every kind of rock imaginable; and several that were beyond imagination.

Down the centre of the room ran the equipment stores. Portable mining outfits, compact analytical sets, U-V examination instruments and a host of other materials required for extensive study of rock specimens.

No one was in sight, so Spear gave a shout of enquiry. He was a little startled when a head popped out from between two specimen cases right next to him.

It belonged to a cheery-faced man with ruddy cheeks and twinkling eyes. "Hullo, there, Marshal!" he called, edging himself right out into the open. "This is a rare pleasure. Have you come to look over the specimens? I've got something here that'll interest you now. Come and see the—"

"Er—not now, Pelsen," Spear said, apologetically. "Not just now, if you wouldn't mind."

He knew that Pelsen was immensely proud of his charges—the Universal Mineral Museum, as he often called it—and that the keeper would cheerfully spend hours explaining the

origin and properties of the rocks.

Now, hearing Spear's apologetic note, Pelsen's face fell. His expression seemed to say that no one of any importance ever came to see his rocks. Then he visibly thrust the thought aside and his face brightened again.

"Oh, well, as you say, some other time, perhaps. But what can I do for you now, Marshal?—and Major?" he added, smiling at Manners.

"We're going out," Spear explained. "Got to do a mineral reconnaissance. Will you send the stuff down to the scooter soon as possible?"

Pelsen's expression became even more cheerful. "Some more specimens, eh? Yes, yes, I'll get the equipment loaded right away." He hesitated, then: "I suppose there's no chance of my coming with you, is there? I've never actually seen any minerals in their native state—only these little pieces." He waved his hand round at the cases. "It would be nice to—"

"I'm sorry," Spear broke in as kindly as he could. "It's against the rules, and I'm rather fond of my rank."

Pelsen sighed. "Yes, of course. I should have known better than to ask. Still, perhaps one day I'll land on a new planet and see rocks as nature made them. Very well, Marshal, I'll get that matter attended to right away. Be seeing you when you bring the specimens!"

The two spacemen took their leave of the keeper, made their way to the first storey. They remained silent until they were emerging from the lift, when Manners said:

"He's the chap who should grumble, you know, not you. Imagine what it must be like to travel these colossal distances and yet not set foot on alien soil. Those rocks he's mad about—they're just pieces of planets he'd give his eye-teeth to see in the raw."

Spear pulled a face filled with recollection. "His imagination probably paints a better picture than reality," he commented. "He keeps his illusions."

"Yes, but—he's so very decent, so very wrapped up in his work. I suppose, Shiny, we couldn't—couldn't wangle him in?"

Spear didn't even shorten his stride. He merely turned

his head to Manners and said: "Pull yourself together, Dirk."

A short distance from the lift they turned into the provision shed. The first storey differed from the rest in that it had no central Rail and was built on a different plan. At the far rear was the power room and beyond it the fuel bunkers from which mercury was pumped up to the ionisation chambers that sent a continuous stream of charged particles out into space, delivering a constant low thrust to the ship.

Higher up, on the mezzanine storey between the fourth and fifth storeys, were the fuel chambers and rocket motor that was used when the ship needed to travel fast. The rocket was now silent.

In front of the power room on the first storey was a repair shed, large as a hangar, for work on the scooter. Next to it came the launching bay, with the scooter itself held in massive clamps. This side of the bay stood the provision shed, into which Spear and Manners went, calling out to the storekeeper as they did so.

Ranged along the walls were the refrigerator chests, powered by the energy that ran the ion-discharger itself. In the chests was enough food and drink to last the ship's complement eight to ten years—all of it previously sterilised by electron bombardment. Two chests were empty, the food having been used during the ship's three-year absence from Earth.

Farther towards the front of the ship was the clothing store, in which was kept the bulk of clothing—a small amount being always on sale in the shops up on the third storey.

Spear told the storekeeper about the proposed trip to Grisette and asked that the scooter be stocked with sufficient food for two men for several weeks. The storekeeper looked puzzled.

"Already been done, Marshal," he explained. "Orders came down from the Old Man—I beg your pardon—from the Commander, a day or two ago. Just after the maintenance men had finished."

The spacemen looked at each other. "Maintenance men?" Spear repeated. "What were they doing to the scooter?"

The storeman shook his head. "I don't know, Marshal. Don't understand these things. Guess they'd tell you if you went along to see them. Anyway, the scooter's all ready stocked with food to last you three months."

The spacemen started in surprise. "How long?" Manners asked, incredulously.

"Three months. That was the Commander's orders."

"But—" Manners began.

Spear touched his arm. "Good," he said, closing the subject. "Thanks, Bruno. Now we'll go have a chat with maintenance."

Manners waited until they were outside the shed and then turned to Spear. "What the blazes is all this about, Shiny? Why'd the Commander have the scooter stocked up for three months? Mineral surveys don't take more than a couple of weeks—and the return journey should be done in a day or two."

Spear's lips were in a straight line. His jaws hardly opened as he spoke. "I don't know, Dirk. You were right about there being something fishy connected with this trip. And I don't like the Commander giving my orders for me!"

"Here's Maintenance," Manners announced as they drew level with the shed. "Let's see if they can throw a light on the business."

But the men inside the maintenance shed appeared to have received "no talk" orders. Try as he would, Spear could get nothing definite from them. All they would admit was that they had carried out a routine check on the scooter's space-worthiness. Their manner indicated that they had done other things, but they weren't talking.

"We just did a few odd jobs ordered by the Commander," the foreman explained. "Nothing much, just odd jobs."

Spear knew better than to press the matter. Even he was aware that Space Marshals didn't cross-question foremen about the Commander's orders.

He left instructions for the scooter to be made ready for take-off in three hours' time. He then rang through to the astrogators' room to ask if data were available on Grisette's position. The disturbing reply was that all navigating data was already lodged in the usual place on board the scooter,

sealed and to be broken open only when the scooter was under way.

Once again the two men looked at each other. This time they shrugged and went off to have a meal—the last one before their long trip into the void.

Fed and rested, they came down to the launching bay three hours later and had a word with the launching technician. It had to be done right. The scooter was a comparatively large ship, over a hundred yards in length and forty yards across. Launching it was a tricky manoeuvre that needed precise timing to get the scooter off in the right direction without its crashing into the bigger ship.

But Spear and the technician had the matter at their finger tips, and a few words together, with an exchange of technical data, settled the question.

"I've tested your radio and radar," the technician claimed. "All okay. Just give me the pips when you're ready and stand by. When you're clear of the ship, you'll get three pips from me. Then you can open her up. Good grounding!"

Spear and Manners returned the greeting and climbed into the scooter. Skillfully designed, it was surprisingly roomy inside, in spite of the massed equipment it contained—equipment that gave a constant feed-back of information to the big ship's statisticians during the whole of a trip.

Spear settled himself in the pilot's seat as Manners closed the air-lock and bolted the door. Crossing to his compact bench, Manners reached up and took an envelope from a pigeon-hole.

"Here's the sealed orders," he said, grimly. "Ever had this sort of thing happen before, Shiny?"

"Never," Spear answered shortly, buckling his safety belt. "Strapped down yet?"

"Just a second," Manners replied. Then, "Okay. All set. D'you want me to open up the packet yet?"

"Let's get away first," Spear said. "I'm giving him the pips now." He depressed a key three times.

He could imagine everyone on the big ship cursing as the gravity alarm went. They would all be hurriedly taking up positions that would leave them stable when the

big ship stopped revolving and the artificially produced gravity vanished. But it would only last a few seconds, while the clamps pushed the scooter out of the big ship and the hammer-arm gave it a little tap. Then the scooter would move slowly away from the big ship, which would almost immediately start revolving again.

The scooter shuddered slightly and the men knew they had been tapped away. Shortly afterwards, Spear called out:

"There're the pips. Now we can get going. Open up that cloak-and-dagger packet and give me the figures soon as you can."

A few seconds later, Manners reeled off the figures. Spear cut in the fuel supply to the rockets and pressed the ignition switch. The scooter bucked, the chairbacks came hard against them. The thrust was just enough not to be too uncomfortable. Spear was able to watch the swinging needles on the dials in front of him, firing one tube, then another, then back to the first one and so on until the dials showed that the scooter was aligned for dropping along an ellipse towards the unknown Grisette.

"That's that," he announced. "Now we can take a rest for a bit." He had shut off the motors, on which the scooter had gone into free-orbit and all sensation of gravity had disappeared. Spear began unbuckling his belt. "Get through to the ship and pip them we're okay, will you, Dirk?"

There was no reply. Spear looked up from the belt and slewed round to stare at Manners. The navigator was staring at some papers in his hand. Suddenly the words Spear had spoken seemed to penetrate. The major started and looked up.

"Sorry, Shiny. Pip the ship? Sure, sure. Yes."

"What the blazes is up with you?" Spear clipped. "Something wrong?"

Manners looked a little vacant. "I don't know," he said. "I'm not sure." He spoke slowly and carefully. "But I don't like it a bit. Look at this, Shiny."

He held out an envelope that had obviously been inside the larger one containing the astrogation data. Across the top of the smaller envelope the Commander had written in

his jerky script: *Open only after leaving the ship on Grisette.* Just that, nothing more.

Spear held the envelope up to the light, noted its complete opacity, then tossed it on Manners' bench. He looked hard at the dulled insignia on his tie, scrutinising it carefully. Manners asked him what he was doing.

"Just making sure they didn't transfer me to the Secret Service in my sleep," Spear answered, wryly. "God Almighty, what is all this!"

"You know as much as I do," Manners said, automatically. "What say we take a look at this *Grisette*, where things are only to be opened on."

"Your grammar is appalling, Dirk, but your idea is good," Spear commented. "Let's do that."

They both moved carefully across to the screen that stood against one wall, leaving the queer envelope floating just above Manners' bench, where it had drifted after striking the wall.

Spear reached out and set the aerial-control to the reading that corresponded to the astrogation data. Then he cut in the power, transferring his hand to the focusing knob ready to sharpen the expected hazy image.

Nothing happened. The screen remained blank.

Puzzled, Spear turned his attention again to the power knob. It seemed all right.

"Try the supply cable," Manners suggested. "Maybe it's come loose."

Spear leaned round the back of the screen assembly—and as he did so, the cabinet rocked. He straightened up and looked at Manners. The navigator returned his stare. The cabinet should have had too much inertia to rock like that.

Suddenly, Spear snatched a screwdriver from the rack of tools on the wall and began attacking the retaining screws on the cabinet's front. At length the front came away.

There was nothing inside the set. Just the cathode tube.

Spear looked at Manners again. "One of maintenance's odd jobs," he said.

"So we don't get a visual picture of *Grisette* until we land. Shiny, I'm beginning to get a little concerned."

CHAPTER THREE

Radar Landing

"I'M with you there," said Shiny Spear. "Although 'concerned' hardly fits my feelings." He pulled himself over to the pilot's seat and pulled himself down onto it—just for the feel of it. Manners came and relaxed in front of him—sitting on air. The navigator's face still wore its usual far-away look.

"How many years have we been space-pushing, Dirk?" Spear queried.

"Fifteen, sixteen," Manners answered, casually.

"Say fifteen. And in all those years—even when I was a cadet—I've never been treated like this. Now that I'm a Marshal, they seem to think I'll stand anything. Me and the Commander are going to have a heart-to-heart talk when we get back to the ship!" He brought his fist down and smacked it on the arm of his seat. Promptly he rose into the air and sailed up against the roof of the cabin.

Manners reached out a lazy arm, grabbed Spear's ankle and pulled him down. "If we get back to the ship," he commented. "Seems to me there must be something about this planet that we're not supposed to know until we get there. And the only reason for holding back the information is that it's not nice."

"Not nice, my foot!" Spear exploded. "Was it nice at the Hub? And was Themis a picnic? And what about *Japetus*—where all the mad people were? Why should the Commander act like a confounded spy just because there's something about *Grisette* that isn't nice?"

"I don't know why," Manners put in, softly. "It just looks as though he is."

"Well, it's a darned insult!" Spear stormed. "And I'll pretty soon tell him when we get back—and none of that

"if" stuff, either, Major Manners. We'll get back. This can hardly be worse than what we've been through before."

"Yes, sir," Manners replied, with a slow smile, used to Spear's tantrums. "All the same, there's got to be a last time—and this may well be it."

"Oh, hell—philosophy again!" Spear grinned. "All right. You go on pontificating, O Seer. I'm getting some sleep!"

With which he calmly stretched out his legs, pushed himself a few inches away from the chair, and closed his eyes, arms determinedly folded across his chest.

Manners watched him for a few moments, his grin widening, then he turned away, caught sight of the visl-screen cabinet and became serious once more.

It was true what Shiny had said. This kind of thing had never happened before. They had always had the full confidence of their superiors. If the job had been a sticky one, they were told so from the start. Never once had they demurred at a dangerous trip. They became renowned for their work, respected for their courage and promoted for their exploits.

And now, Commander Kalep was treating them like youngsters who might pale at the mention of danger.

Manners mused for some time, staring at the empty screen. Finally he decided that either there was something wrong with the Commander's brain or the assignment to Grisette was very, very dangerous. On the whole, he preferred the alternative, there was nothing in the first to stir his excitement. Whereas in the second . . .

He forcibly quelled his thoughts, stretched out like Spear and was very soon asleep.

The hours went by and the scooter continued its elliptical flight down towards Grisette. The men, poised in the gravity-less air, breathed fresh oxygen that was wafted to them by a slowly-turning electric fan; and drifted gently towards the walls under the minute gravitational forces of the stacked equipment.

As the distance between the scooter and Grisette decreased, so a pointer moved round a dial on the instrument panel, towards a red line.

An instant before the pointer reached the red mark the

men were deeply asleep. An instant afterwards they were wide awake, reaching frantically for the stop button to the alarm the pointer had set in action. Spear's groping finger found the button, pressed it, and plunged the cabin into silence once more.

Automatically, he turned and swept his eyes over the other dials, instinctively amassing the information they presented and quickly reaching a picture of the scooter's circumstances.

"Plenty safe," was his verdict. "These alarms certainly give us a wide margin."

Manners had roused himself and gone over to the navigator's bench. He hovered there now, slightly bleary-eyed, but with a calculator ready in his hand, waiting for Spear's landing queries.

Spear glanced at him. "Okay? Good. I'm starting the braking jets in ten seconds. We'll have to land on radar alone. Keep your fingers crossed—it's a long time since I did that. Just shout the data as it comes up on the screen."

He turned back to his instruments, while Manners cut in the radar echo gear and studied the blips on the screen.

"Right!" Spear said, suddenly. Simultaneously, his hand wrenched over a lever. The roar of the jets came through to them as a muffled, sustained cough. Gravity instantly returned and they were pressed against their seats, finding the familiar sensation strangely comforting.

Every few seconds, Manners called out data he had calculated from the blips on the screen. Each time, Spear repeated the data and made adjustments to the strength and direction of the jets, his eyes darting frequently to a chronometer, his mind devoid of all thought except the careful interweaving of all the factors necessary for a safe landing.

Manners broke into Spear's concentration by sandwiching a piece of gossip in between the data readings.

"Flat as a pancake," he said. "No mountains, hills, or rivers. Odd. Twenty-seven thousand, theta-o-eight."

"Twenty-seven thousand. Theta-o-eight. Flat, eh?" Spear drawled. "Never had that before. Hope they haven't been up to tricks with the radar."

"Twenty thousand. Theta-o-nine. Don't think so. Seems to be working well enough."

"Twenty thousand. Theta-o-nine. We'll know soon enough if we crack up," Spear replied. "No more gossip now. We're coming in close. Double your reading frequency."

"Okay. Fifteen thousand. Theta-one-five."

The thrust increased as Spear opened out the jets. Soon the force became uncomfortable. After that it came very close to agony as the scooter strove against the downward pull of Grisette. The planet's atmosphere was playing a part in slowing the ship down, but not a very big part. Only if they had come in in braking ellipses would the air have been a major factor; but there wasn't time for such refinements. The rockets alone had to bring the ship to zero velocity at the precise moment that its tail touched Grisette's surface.

Manners' readings came fast and clipped. Spear ceased to repeat them, giving his whole attention to the manipulations of his instruments, countering side-spins, tilts and unaccountable disturbances that always occur in rocketry.

The atmosphere in the cabin became tensed and charged with suppressed excitement as the scooter came closer and closer to Grisette's surface. Manners kept his eyes fixed on the screen watching, in effect, the ground rise up towards the ship. Spear could see the same thing inside his mind, as the figures came to him and he placed them in their proper relation to each other.

The critical stage was approaching, came nearer, nearer still—and then was passed.

The cabin remained silent for several seconds, the jets having given a last despairing cough and petered out under Spear's expert control. For a split instant the scooter shuddered. Came a grating sound in the tail region. Then the deep, almost unreal silence took over.

Several seconds later, Manners realised the cabin was not really silent at all. The radar set was still humming. He reached out and switched it off, then turned to regard Spear.

The Marshal was still staring at his instrument panel, but this time his eyes did not register their data. He was resting, turning over at the back of his mind the soft, comforting thought that he could still make a perfect landing on radar alone. Then he remembered that all the pioneer

astronauts had been forced to do that, anyway, and his ego deflated a little. Even so, it was pretty good going—like a surgeon suddenly having to carry out an operation with the old-style scalpels and forceps, the patient being unconscious all the time in the grip of a dangerous anaesthetic.

He came out of his reverie and slewed round to meet Manners' eyes. "We made it," he said. "And won't the Commander be pleased!"

Manners grinned. "Still sore?" he queried. "I've got over it by now." He rose and stood impatiently before the still-seated Spear. "Let's go out, eh? See what all the mystery's about."

Spear regarded him solemnly. "I'm surprised," he said. "Surprised and a little dismayed. Here I am set down on an unknown planet, with Lord knows what waiting for me outside, and my only companion is a man who wants to go out—before he's done the testing!"

"Oh—Pleiades to you!" Manners laughed. "I wasn't suggesting we turn out before I've run the tape over things. It's just that you look as though you're going to sit there for the next three days congratulating yourself on a trick bit of landing. Age, I suppose!"

Spear sprang to his feet. "I'll show you whether it's age or not," he said. "Just you get those tests done, while I fill out the log. Then we'll see who's the adventurous pioneer among this ship's complement!"

Still smiling, he turned away to the compact writing desk in one corner and busied himself with a record of the landing—just in case anything happened to them and the big ship had to send down a search party.

While Spear worked at the log, Manners sucked in a sample of air, analysed it chemically, physically and biologically. He found it free from noxious gases and harmful bacteria, and at a pressure that was very similar to Earth's atmosphere a little above sea-level.

Next he pushed out the differential Geiger counter and plugged it in to the monitoring cabinet. Spear looked up from the last word of his log as the first clicks came through.

"What d'you make of it?" he asked.

"Gases okay," Manners replied. "So too with pressure and bugs. I guess it'll be all right—wait a minute, though."

He sat silently while the clicks continued. Spear watched with an expression that explained quite clearly that he left the world of radiation detectors to men with a mind for it. Idly, his glance moved to the air-lock, waiting for Manners' release so as to be the first to open it.

"Hmm," Manners murmured after a bit. "There's certainly a queer bit of radiation here. Nothing that we know is harmful and only in dilute concentration at that. Still—we don't want to take chances."

Spear cursed. "You mean we can't go out?" he said, irritably.

"Oh, no, not that. But I think we ought not to stay out too long before we stick ourselves in the monitor."

Spear brightened visibly. "Oh, well, that's all right, then. We'll go straight out." He moved over to the air-lock.

Manners smiled as he watched him. Spear had the layman's half disbelief in radiations, as though they were something that scientists played about with in their laboratories. Even the tremendous evidence of the atomic explosions hadn't convinced him that gamma rays and other radiations were real and tangible things.

By this time, Spear had got the air-lock open. He stood back to let Manners into the chamber, then came in after him. He carefully shut the inner door before he started to open the outer one.

"Why'd you do that?" Manners asked. "Grisette's air is more or less the same as ours."

"Very likely," Spear agreed, swinging back the outer door. "But I like to keep just a little of the familiar around me on trips like this—even if it *is* invisible!"

Natural light streamed into the air-lock chamber as the outer door opened. It was a little brighter than the artificial light from the ceiling, but not much.

Spear stepped through the gap and dropped the foot or two to the ground. Manners came close behind him. They stood side by side, letting human eyes gaze for the first time, as far as they knew, at the alien landscape.

As a landscape it wasn't much of a picture. Indeed, the painters of long ago would never have wasted a tube of oil colour on it—not even the man who found beauty in dead sunflowers,

The ground they stood on was flat. Perfectly flat and even and made of grey stone. Dull, uninteresting, flat, grey stone. And the ground they stood on ran unchanged right to the horizon, except for—monoliths.

Both men uttered sharp exclamations as their eyes fell on the gigantic columns of stone, spaced at hundred-yard distances in a uniform pattern that, too, stretched to the horizon.

If the painters of long ago would not have looked twice at Grisette's landscape, the surrealists of the day would have swooned over it. The sharp clear sunlight, streaming from a cloudless sky, sent long dramatic shadows along the flat ground where it was obscured by the monoliths. And the monoliths were everywhere—spaced exactly, uniform in height and contour; stark, silent sentinels, featureless, yet awesome with potent as a Henry Moore statue.

The men looked on the scene in silence that matched the planet's, then, with what to their knowledge might have been the first sound ever to be made on Grisette, Manners said softly:

"Surely they were made by intelligent beings!"

Spear stirred, slipped his hands in his pockets. "Surely anyone who'd make those," he commented, "couldn't have a spark of intelligence in them!"

Manners lost some of his wraptness and came back to reality. He sent Spear a contemptuous look. "Just because your mind is unable to encompass anything that isn't made of wheels, pulleys, levers and power packs, it doesn't mean that all other creations are the work of cretins!"

They both laughed. And their laughter seemed to run in and out of the stone columns, spreading like an invisible sea over the face of Grisette, until it faded out and the ripples died in the far distance. Their laughter ceased as they listened to it dying among the tombstones.

Spear coughed. "Er—well," he began, breaking the silence that became a little unnerving. "Let's get the jeep out and see if we can find the cromlech."

Manners looked up in surprise. He'd no idea that Spear was so erudite as to know the name of the horizontal stone slab found among primitive collections of monoliths. Spear caught his glance and grimaced. Such jocularity as this and

that which had preceded it seemed silly in cold analysis on a warm friendly planet like Earth, but were utterly essential to maintain morale on bleak and potentially dangerous places like Grisette.

Chuckling at his use of the word *cromlech*, Spear opened a small panel set on the outside of the scooter. He pressed a button inside it. Above his head, about halfway up the scooter, a door opened and a mechanical arm came out, holding a diminutive vehicle. Spear pressed another button and the jeep dropped gradually down on the end of a hawser until it came to the ground. There it settled firmly on its skids-cum-tracks-cum wheels.

Manners came hurrying over with armfuls of materials. Spear saw that he had slipped inside the scooter and brought out a supply of weapons and iron rations.

"No chances, eh?" Spear grinned.

Manners grinned back. "No chances," he agreed.

But there was a vein of utmost seriousness beneath their light-heartedness. It wouldn't be the first time that a party made its first preliminary survey and perished because of unforeseen factors preventing its return to base, or because of a sudden need for weapons which had been carelessly left on the ship.

"We'll make it a short trip," Spear announced, as he climbed into the driving seat and Manners clambered up beside him. "Then we'll come back, eat, sleep and then do the survey for Old Man Kalep. It shouldn't take too long."

"No," Manners agreed. "We ought to be through by this time tomorrow—Earth time."

It was good to sound confident about things like that. Especially when they had no idea what they might meet behind one of those monoliths.

Spear let in the clutch and the jeep moved off.

CHAPTER FOUR

Preliminary Survey

EVEN after centuries of artificial living, Man still retained the capacity for finding pleasure in the natural scheme of things. Doubts and suspicions in the minds of the spacemen were practically crowded out as the jeep chugged its way along in the bright sunlight.

Overhead, the sky was a vast sheet of unrelieved blue, except where it paled and grew brilliant in the region of the planet's sun—Algol. Around them, a cooling breeze seemed strangely unfamiliar after the static air of the big ship. The warm, somnolent environment was entrancing enough indeed to make Shiny Spear burst forth into a caroling spaceman's song.

Manners turned slightly on his seat and spoke into Spear's ear, loudly above the singing. "Have you forgotten the rule which says we musn't do anything that might antagonise the natives?"

Spear refrained from replying to the sally, merely ceasing to sing at the same time as he rammed his foot down on the accelerator, making the jeep leap forward across the smooth stone.

Manners held his breath as Spear expertly guided the speeding car around the monoliths, missing some of them by the thickness of the bumper paintwork.

"All right," Dirk ceded at last, "I'll take it back. It was a fine song and yours is a fine voice. Any natives who might hear it would know without question that we are descended from the gods. Does that satisfy you?"

Spear put his answer into words by taking his foot off the accelerator and letting the car slow almost to a halt.

Throughout the whole mock quarrel, the two men had kept a good three-quarters of their attention on the terrain around them. Years of exploratory work on alien planets had taught a number of automatic responses, and one of

them was constant vigilance when outside their ship. Long experience enabled them to maintain that vigilance without unduly interfering with their survey methods.

"See anything?" Spear asked, letting the jeep come to a stop between two monoliths.

"Not a thing," Manners answered. "That is, nothing that I hadn't seen before—stone, monoliths, sky."

They had travelled some two thousand yards from the scooter, yet the terrain had retained its pattern all the way. The landscape looked no different from here than it did from the ship.

"You're a bit of a biologist," Spear said, "so I don't have to tell you the oddest thing about this planet, I suppose?"

Manners didn't rise to the bait. He remained staring into the distance, thinking. "No," he said at last. "I've noticed it all right. No animal life, no vegetation. Not even a plot of soil. This is certainly the most barren land I've ever seen—and yet . . ."

His voice died away, as though he were a little ashamed to say what was in his mind. Spear didn't go in for shyness.

"And yet what?" he prompted. "D'you think you've seen something after all?"

"Nothing you haven't seen," Manners replied. "Just these monoliths. I'm convinced they were erected by intelligent beings. I don't see how any natural process could produce such a regular pattern as this on such a vast scale."

Spear considered that statement for a while, then conceded: "Well, I'll not agree about the intelligent part of it, but I reckon you're right about their being made by beings—and that's all that matters at the moment."

"True. Though the intelligence part that you dismiss so casually may be very important later on."

"Let's wait till later on and see," Spear proposed. "We'll probably find the monoliths are stuck up by a bunch of termites or something that don't really know what they're doing anyway."

"Maybe," Manners said, shortly. "Anyway, what about taking a closer look at one of the monoliths?"

"Good idea," Spear returned. "Which one? They all look alike to me."

"Then it had best be the nearest one," Manners suggested.

Spear put the jeep in gear and let it roll slowly towards the nearest monolith. He was using the wheel part of the drive mechanism; the skids, suckers and tracks were raised from the ground, but ready for instant use should the terrain suddenly change its character.

While he drove towards the stone monument, Spear noticed that Manners was adjusting the weapons so that they would be ready for immediate firing if necessary. He didn't comment. It was part of the automatic routine.

Spear brought the jeep to a halt a few yards from the monolith and the two men sat staring at it at close quarters. It was smooth and featureless, rising to a height of about fifty feet, in diameter fat enough to hold a dozen men.

Without speaking they got out of the jeep and approached the stone. Spear, a side-arm within finger reach, stepped right up to the monolith and kicked it. A dull, empty thud sounded.

"Seems solid," Spear diagnosed.

"Must weigh hundreds of tons," Manners added. "How the blazes did they lift them?"

"Maybe they're giants," Spear laughed. "And this is a sort of causeway. You still think they were brainy boys, eh?"

"At least they knew how to hew stone and raise it—the Egyptians didn't do much more."

"They carved out pictures, though," Spear objected. "These things are bare completely. Not even a few digs on the surface. And are you sure they were lifted? I can't see any joins anywhere."

The two men came very close to the stone, ran their hands over it and peered at it intently. There was not one crack in its whole height as far as they could see. It appeared to be a solid piece of stone.

Manners knelt beside it. "Look here, Shiny," he called. "There isn't even a crack at the bottom where it meets the ground."

Spear bent down and confirmed Manners' statement. The monolith's base curved outwards slightly and made a smooth jointless union with the surrounding flat stone. The men straightened up.

"Another thing that strikes me," Manners said, "is where did they get the stone to make these monoliths? As far as we can see there aren't any quarries, no dug-out regions, where the stone could have come from. And this flatness is almost unbelievable."

"True," Spear ruminated. "Of course, they could have brought the stone from miles and miles away, laid it down flat and then brought more for the monoliths."

"Why?" Manners demanded.

"Don't ask me—you're the one who says they're intelligent," Spear clipped. "I think they're pretty dumb—why, they haven't even got a cromlech!"

They both laughed at his use of the technical term. Still chuckling, they climbed back into the jeep with the intention of returning to the scooter. Spear's mirth ceased suddenly as he started the engine.

"Oh, heck," he said.

Manners was watching him, still grinning. "What's the matter, pioneer of the planets?" he asked.

"Dirk, for Pete's sake, this is serious," Spear said, concernedly. "I'm lost! All that driving in and out of the monoliths has made me lose my direction." He stared round at the forest of stone slabs, each direction looking no different from the others. Somewhere among those stone trees was the scooter; but he had no idea where.

Manners came to his rescue with a chuckle. "Good job I'm around," he laughed, pulling a compass from his pocket. "You didn't bring yours, I suppose?"

Spear admitted that he hadn't. The compass, specially designed to point only in the direction of the ship, was a standard piece of equipment for researchers. Its main use was on thickly vegetated planets, where the surveyor was liable to lose direction in the jungles. Absence of a conventional jungle on Grisette had caused Spear to leave his instrument in the scooter.

Spear looked visibly relieved when he saw Manners' compass. "Good job, indeed," he agreed wholeheartedly,

thrusting away thoughts of trying to find his way back to the ship through that maze of masonry. "I take back everything I said about you. And as a slight reward, you may prepare our supper to-night!"

That last remark was deliberate in order to wipe away any hint of sentimentality that might have crept into his voice.

Mention of supper made them glance at the sky. The sun was lowering and deep blue hues were rolling up from the opposite horizon. Grisette's night was approaching.

Spear started up the jeep as Manners placed the compass in front of him. He let the car move forward, half an eye on the compass needle, the other half on the monoliths. Progress was a zigzag.

Occupied with their own thoughts, the men remained silent while the jeep purred over the flat stone. Manners' mind was turning over the riddle of the monoliths, their origin and purpose, the whereabouts of their erectors. That part of Spear's mind that was not concerned with driving, was going over the contents of the scooter's larder in an effort to select something decidedly succulent for supper.

It was only when they had been travelling for about half an hour that Manners began to stir uncomfortably and glance at Spear. From the corner of his eye, Spear noted the glance.

"What's up?" he queried.

"Shouldn't we have got there by now?" Manners said.

They both looked at the compass. The jeep was dead on line.

"No telling, since we didn't clock ourselves on the outward journey. We're on the beam and I imagine we'll be there very shortly," Spear said, lightly.

He resumed his driving—but his eyes lost a little of their brightness as they strayed up to the sky again. Night was not only on its way; it was practically there. Algal was a blood red orange fast disappearing behind the tops of distant monoliths. On the opposite side, the monoliths were hardly visible among the night shades. Spear pressed the accelerator a little harder.

Fifteen minutes later, he stopped the car. They had been travelling for three-quarters of an hour, dead on the compass line all the while and yet no scooter had looked

up from the dusk in front of them.

"At a rough guess, I'd say we've done fifteen miles since we left that monolith," Spear said. "And I'd swear we only went out about a mile. D'you feel like sleeping in the jeep, Dirk?"

Manners' face was serious. "Not a bit. Nor do I fancy leaving the ship alone all that time. What the heck's wrong with the compass?"

The homing compass was supposed to be foolproof since it didn't depend on any magnetic effects. In effect it was really a radio monitor, tuned to a frequency constantly emitted by the ship. Where the ship was, there it would point. If there was no ship within its range, then it didn't function at all.

The one on the dashboard was functioning. Therefore, there ought to be a ship in the vicinity.

"Let's work it out," Spear said. "The compass is working. Therefore, unless there's some entirely new principle at work, the scooter lies in that direction." He pointed along the needle's length. "But we've travelled fifteen miles in line with the needle and not come across the scooter. The landscape is such that we can't tell whether we're travelling in a straight line or not. Therefore—"

"What about the sun?" Manners broke in, excitedly.

Spear blinked. "The sun? What—oh, holy Saturn!"

He glanced out at the sinking orb, then back at Manners. "Am I a fool, or am I not? You don't need to answer; you probably feel the same as I do."

"I expect so," Manners agreed. "You're dead right if what you're thinking is that a while back the sun was over there, whereas its now there." He pointed in two directions, forty-five degrees apart.

"That's it," Spear confirmed. "That's the trouble with spending three years inside a hulking great space ship—you lose touch with simple things like finding direction by the sun. Still, we ought to have known."

"Before we castigate ourselves any further," Manners put in, "has it struck you what all this means?—why the sun has changed direction relative to the compass needle?"

Spear stood and thought for a minute, less than a minute. It came on him in a flash. "Hell's bells and buckets of spaceman's blood!" he exclaimed. "The scooter's been

moved!"

"That would appear to be it," Manners said, calmly. His features were in soft repose—an expression Spear had seen too often to be beguiled by it. Beneath the calm exterior, Spear knew, Manners was all keyed up for action.

"I see! I see!" Spear cried. "All the time we've been moving towards it, someone's been shifting the scooter from place to place. We've probably been travelling in a drunken spiral."

"Unless, of course, there's this business of an entirely new principle," Manners suggested.

"New principle my foot!" Spear bellowed, jumping to his feet. "It's those darn precocious termites of yours. By Perseus, I'm going to have a fine old chat with them when we meet up!"

"Good for you. But, meantime, shall we keep our minds on how we're going to get back to the scooter? If these termites, as you call them, carry on moving it about, I don't see how we'll ever catch up with it."

"The blisters!" Spear exclaimed. He sat down sharply and stared at the ground, jaws clenched, knuckles whitened. He looked up once to say despairingly: "Suppose they encase the thing in one of those darned stalagmites!" and then relapsed into silence again.

As he sat, the shades of night grew deeper. All shadow had long since departed. Only the dusky blue-darkness of the sky turned slowly black. Very soon it became almost impossible for him to see Manners beside him. He twisted round to him and said irritably:

"Can't you think of anything, man? We can't sit out here all night with Lord knows what happening to the scooter!"

Manners was staring straight ahead. He stretched his legs and yawned. "Oh, I don't know. It's nice and peaceful."

"Nice and—!" Spear began, but Manners cut in on him with a laugh.

"Sorry to goad you! Point is, I've already thought of something. All we have to do is wait for it to get really dark. Then the automatic beacon will come on. Strange as it seems and deflattering as it might be to our egos, we don't have to do anything brave or ingenious."

Spear didn't answer for some seconds. Then his body relaxed its tightness and he chuckled. "A fine blow to our conceit" he laughed. "Here am I scheming all sorts of ways to outwit the termites, and the whole thing is taken out of my hands. Praise be to the beacon!"

Attached at the three points of a triangle near the nose of the research scooters were powerful lamps that were controlled automatically by photosensitive plates set in the hull of the ship. As soon as the ambient luminosity fell below a certain figure, the lamps would come on and continue to burn, unless extinguished, until a sufficient strength of daylight returned to activate the photocells.

Almost as soon as Spear had finished his eulogy to the beacon, its piercing rays shot out into the night away ahead of them. The actual lamps were hidden by the monoliths, but the glare could be seen distinctly. It was quite stationary.

"Home we go to supper," Spear announced, cheerfully, letting in the clutch and allowing the jeep to move forward.

The car's own headlights picked out the impeding monoliths without greatly cancelling the guiding glare from the beacon. Taking his eyes from the compass, Spear simply watched the glare ahead and drove towards it. Manners kept up a continuous survey of their surroundings, a rifle across his knees.

Fifteen minutes later they were close enough to the scooter to feel they had won the first battle against the 'termites'—unconventional as that battle had been.

Spear drove the jeep right up to the ship and brought it to a halt. The two men piled out and, leaving the jeep standing, hurried towards the air-lock, their intention to see if anything had been stolen, wrecked or tampered with during their absence.

Although night was now at its deepest hue, the light from the beacon lit up the immediate surroundings quite strongly. The men could make out every detail of the ship's structure and the flat stone around it, and the monoliths beyond. A quick glance round showed that nothing was in sight that hadn't been there when they landed.

Yet as they were about to enter the air-lock, a thin fluted voice bade them "Welcome."

CHAPTER FIVE

A New Life-form

THE two men stood quite still. Only silence met their ears. Then, Spear suddenly lunged forward, hoisted himself up into the air-lock chamber and scrambled into the ship. Manners was fast behind him.

A cursory glance showed nothing out of place and no alien visitor waiting for them. A deeper, more searching examination did nothing to better explain the disembodied voice.

A little shaken, the two men closed the exit door and set about preparing their supper, discussing the voice while they did so.

"I'm only thankful you heard it, too, Dirk," Spear said. "But for that I'd have thought I was going crazy."

"Oh, the sound was real enough," Manners replied, neatly laying out the eating equipment on the collapsible table. "We'll get the explanation sometime, I guess. It was at least greetings and not anything hostile."

"True." Spear ladled out steaming soup. "And I suppose they could have kept moving the ship around all night. Considerate of them not to."

The men fell to with an appetite undimmed by alien idiosyncrasies and worked their way rapidly through soup, frozen turbot, and a choice veal cutlet, accompanied by peas, potatoes and the succulent Martian lichen *astera*. Afterwards they cleared away and sat back with coffee and cigarettes. The spaceman's life was not entirely a bed of nails.

"The time has come," Spear said, ponderously, "to read

the secret instructions. Break the sacred seal, Dirk, old boy."

Manners reached out for the envelope he had left on the navigation bench. He turned it over in his hands.

"The answer to it all, d'you suppose?" he queried.

"Maybe, maybe not. I don't know—and after a meal like that, I don't really care. Read it aloud."

Manners slit the envelope open, took out a page or two of paper covered with the Old Man's spidery, jerky handwriting.

"Didn't even trust a stenog," Manners commented.

"Either that or he forgot there were such things as stenogs."

"Which, to a man of your predilections, is one of the greatest sins!" Spear laughed. "Read it, man, read it! I'm all on edge."

"Gentlemen," Manners began, reading from the script. *"I ask your forgiveness for this unusual mode of conducting a mineral survey. Perhaps you will be more willing to forgive me when you have read this note and understand my actions. Let me begin by saying that this journey of yours is not a mineral survey."*

"There!" Spear broke in. "I knew that the Old Man was crazy!"

Manners looked up from the script. "Not so crazy, Shiny. At our interview with him, I got the impression that he was tremendously sane—I got the feeling that there was something more than eccentricity behind his remarkable behaviour—especially with regard to this trip."

"Wise man," Spear grimaced. "After the event."

Manners ignored the attack. He continued to read from the script: *"I must tell you that we made certain observations from the big ship which indicate that Grisette is possessed of an entirely new life form. I will not bother you with the details, partly not to waste your time and partly not to give you preconceived notions. Suffice it, then, to say that I felt you two gentlemen were the ideal choice for the job—your tremendous experience in space and*

your vast knowledge of anthropology make you perfect types for this kind of research."

"Soft, oh, very soft," Spear snarled. "And very, very soapy. Something nasty's coming!"

Manners continued: *"You will understand, I am sure, why I have adopted these methods when I tell you that our observations indicate that this new form of life may well be hostile to humanity, and that if this is so your chances of survival are, shall we say, a little remote."*

"Yes, let's say that," Spear commented. "Let's keep on saying it. As many times as the perishing Commander wants!"

"Take it easy, Shiny," Manners said. "The poor fellow's doing his best to break it gently."

"Oh, go on, go on!" Spear urged. "Read the thing through and let's get it all over."

Manners read quickly. The Commander's note went on to point out the heroism of their task, all the more heroic because no one would ever know the true story if they perished. Headquarters on Earth would take a poor view of such dangerous research. But science had to progress and it was the Commander's great sorrow that he could not accompany them in person.

Anyway, they were to make exhaustive studies of the new form of life and enter up everything in the log. The ship was to be primed for immediate take-off, and if they ever got into a position that seemed hopeless, they were to fire the ship by remote control. The Commander would arrange for it to be picked up by the big ship. They could die with the satisfaction of knowing that they had contributed to a most worthy cause. They need not bother with too much mining—in fact, so the note said, cryptically, it might be better if they didn't mine at all.

Manners laid the note down. Spear gave it a contemptuous glance. "Good cause. What good cause? The Commander's own academic curiosity!"

Manners watched him crush out a cigarette with more

energy than was really required. "I see you don't understand," he accused. "We're not here as guinea pigs in an experiment of the Commander's. If there's a new life form here, the people of Earth must know about it. It's a long-term policy—like the whole of our research."

"Then why would Headquarters take a poor view of it?" Spear demanded.

"Because they cannot see quite so far ahead as the scientists," Manners explained. "This may not be practically important for centuries. It has only a theoretical importance at the present time."

"So we die and science gets a new theory," Spear rejoined, irritably.

"No. We die—and Earth gets a new lease of life if the new form attacks it in the future."

Spear considered for a moment, began to see it in a broader light, modified his idea. His frown went and the tenseness left his body.

"Ah, well, we're not dead yet!" he exclaimed. "How about some sleep?"

"Sleep it is," Manners agreed, knowing that now Spear had had his initial grumble at the Big White Chiefs, he would throw himself whole-heartedly into the task before them.

The night was silent and uneventful. The men slept dreamlessly and well—a habit they had contracted over the years of sleeping in odd places. An alarm bell roused them eight hours after they had gone to rest on the folding hammocks. Spear left the control cabin and took a shower in the tiny bathroom aft, while Manners began the breakfast preparations. Then it was Manners' turn, and he showered while Spear put the finishing touches to the meal.

Over breakfast they discussed the day's work.

"I suppose our first task is to make contact with the new life form," Spear said. "Though I can't see why ter-

mites should be classified as something new. Still, I'm no biologist."

"Whatever the Commander had in mind was not termites," Manners asserted. "God knows what else, mind you, but definitely not termites."

"Well, anyway, how are we going to get in touch with them—with the owner of that voice we heard last night?"

"I don't see any way other than going out and mooching around, hoping they come to us," Manners said. "The whole landscape looks the same, so there's no point in going anywhere."

Spear agreed. Yesterday they had travelled a good twenty miles with no sign of the aliens—except that the ship had been moved while they were away. Maybe today, if they stayed near the ship they would come in contact with the aliens.

Breakfast was a short meal. The usual coffee and cigarettes—the spaceman's ritual—they decided to have in the bright clean air of Grisette. Spear passed the coffee mugs down to Manners and climbed down after them. They sat with their backs to the ship, legs stretched out on the flat stone ground. For some minutes they sipped and smoked in silence. Then Spear stirred.

"You know," he said. "I'd swear that monolith wasn't as near as that last night." He indicated a column in front of them. "It seemed at least twice that distance."

Manners stared at the column and then cast a glance over the rest of the terrain. "The pattern doesn't seem to have been disturbed," he said. "If this one had moved alone the whole pattern would have been thrown out of alignment."

"Maybe they all moved," Spear suggested. Manners didn't answer. Spear asked him why not.

"I'm just figuring roughly the amount of energy needed to shift every one of those things a few inches. I should think it would just about be enough to push the Moon out of its orbit."

"Mmm. As heavy as that?" Spear mused. "Well, well. Perhaps it hasn't moved. I think I'll do a bit of drilling. See how tough they are."

Manners stayed on the ground sipping his coffee. Spear climbed back into the ship, reappearing a few moments later with a portable drill on the end of a long snaking cable.

Manners watched idly as Spear walked up to the nearest monolith, selected a bit, placed it in the drill and switched on the power. The drill hummed quietly. Spear placed the whirling bit against the stone monolith.

Immediately, the whole peace of the morning was shattered. Where there had been nothing but the quiet hum of the drill under the blue sky and among the tall silent stones, there was now such a caterwauling cacophony of shrieking agony that the adrenalin poured into Manners' blood stream, sending him scrambling to his feet.

Spear seemed to have been paralysed by the high-pitched screams that came from nowhere and everywhere. He stood there beside the monolith, the drill in his drooping hand, its hum drowned by the harsh, strident wail.

Suddenly something flashed towards Spear, and Manners saw the drill fall from his hand to the stone, where it rocked and gyrated under the power within itself. Spear seemed to have been brought back to life. He was holding his hand in pain, and Manners could see a red trickle spreading over the wrist.

Hurrying across to Spear, Manners bombarded him with questions. Spear turned on him irritably.

"How the heck do I know! For Pete's sake! I'm just standing here—and suddenly there's that darned shrieking and then something or someone hurls a rock at me. Look at that!"

He held up a badly cut hand. The rock Spear had mentioned must have struck the back of the metacarpus, biting deeply down between the bones, leaving a red and gory wound.

Suddenly Manners risked another question. By now the

wailing had died to a low whistling moan. "Where's the rock that did it, Shiny?"

The first sharp jagged pain had gone, leaving just a dull ache. With it had gone Spear's unreasoned irritability. He looked at Manners and then at the ground. He turned right round. And still saw nothing.

The ground was as flat and even as it had always been. Nothing interrupted its flatness anywhere except the tall monoliths.

"I suppose it *was* a stone?" Manners meditated.

"Sure of it," Spear asserted. "I saw it drop at my feet."

"Well, it certainly isn't there now. D'you suppose we're dealing with a being that's invisible to our eyes—you know, something that only sets up reflections in some other spectrum than the electro-magnetic one?"

"Could be," Spear agreed. "And maybe these monoliths are some part of their sacred edifices—I don't see why else they should be so touchy about them. After all, I was only going to drill a small—"

"It's because they're alive."

Spear broke off in mid-sentence and stared at Manners. "What did you say?"

Manners didn't move. His eyes were on the monolith.

"I didn't say anything, Shiny," he said, slowly. "This said it. It must have been that which spoke last night."

Spear glanced from the monolith to Manners and back at the monolith. Then back to Manners again. "Er—Dirk," he said, "shal we call it a day for now and—and have a lie down or—or something?"

"There's nothing wrong with me," Shiny," Manners responded. "Neither with my brain nor my body. I'm perfectly all right and I'm telling you that these things are alive. This is the new life-form the Commander was talking about."

Spear was having difficulty in finding the right words. "It's cock-eyed madness, that's what it is! Stone—alive and talking! If these things are alive I'll eat my—"

"Careful," said a voice that was not Manners'. "You would live to regret such a claim."

Spear watched Manners' lips carefully. "Say that again," he said.

Obligingly, the voice came again. This time, Spear was sure that Manners wasn't doing a ventriloquist stunt. Besides, the voice was distinctly unhuman. He sat on the ground and ran wiry fingers through his sleek hair, unconcernedly disarranging it.

"Now look, monolith," he said. "I've been around. I've seen things no Earth-lubber would believe. My mind is wide open for instruction. Tell me, please, *what is all this!*"

Came a sound that could have been interpreted as a stony chuckle. It was strange how the sound was so intimately connected with one's idea of stone and rock. The two men listened. At first they had to force themselves to believe, then as the story unfolded, they began to accept everything that was told them. At the end, they were convinced. Still amazed, but convinced.

Grisette, the monolith explained, did indeed contain a new life form. But it was new only in fact—not in fiction or in theory. Many centuries before, men on Earth had written and talked about a hypothetical life-form based on silicon instead of carbon. This was it. Though not exactly. Grisette's life-form was based on its own mineral equivalent to Earth's silicon.

"We can, if you wish, invent a name for it," the monolith went on. "Or we can call it silicon, whichever you prefer. It doesn't really matter. The important point is that, even according to many Earth standards, we are alive—I say we, because you obviously look upon these columns as separate individuals; just as I gather you are two separate organisms. On Grisette, however, the silicon life-form is one. All these columns, all the ground you walk upon are part of one creature."

Here, the two men looked around them, awed now at the thought of such a completely alien alien. To think that all

those thousands of monoliths, all that great expanse of even stone, was one vast animal . . .

"Just as your own terrestrial silicon forms short chains," the monolith went on, "so our main element forms even greater chains. And every chain is interlinked. We are, in fact, mainly what you would call a nervous system—that is why your drill hurt so much and set up such a universal cry of pain. We have no organs of locomotion, reproduction or respiration. Unlike your own life-forms, we do not respire. Nothing is taken in or given out. We talk and think by sliding 'silicon' chains against each other. The stimuli set up can travel over the whole creature."

"The energy," Manners queried. "Where does the energy come from to do all this?"

"There is a stock of potential energy that was here in the beginning," the monolith replied. "It is simply moved from place to place."

Manners remembered that once an Earth scientist had dissected out the nerve ring of a jellyfish and stimulated it. The impulse had travelled round and round the ring for eleven days covering 457 miles, before enough muscular tissue had been regenerated to absorb the impulse. Obviously, the nerve net of the monoliths was like that. Once an impulse had been started, it could move from place to place without any extra energy being needed. But Manners was still unsatisfied about respiration. He queried the monolith on it.

"Think of your own complex machines—the electron brains," the monolith directed. "They do not respire. If they could maintain their energy content, they would 'live' for ever without any kind of gaseous interchange or any other form of respiration. We are like that. Like your machines. Only, we have intrinsic life."

"And our language—how come you are able to speak it as well as we do?"

A sound something like a sigh came from the monolith. "That, of course, is a long story. Roughly it is a question

of building up a wide scheme from a few examples—much as your archeologists developed a good idea of ancient Egyptian language. But you will not want too much lecturing all at once. We can have many talks on these things later. For the moment, I merely wish you to promise me that no more drillings will be made.”

Both Spear and Manners agreed whole-heartedly. In both their minds they could see how awful the first touch of that spinning bit must have been to the creature. Manners stared at it, still feeling a little queer talking to a stone.

“You—you aren’t hostile towards us? I mean, you don’t terribly resent our coming?”

Manners felt that if the column could have shrugged it would have done so. “You are intelligent,” it said. “You are open to reason—as you have shown by promising not to drill any more. While you do not harm me, why should I be hostile?”

“There are other planets,” Manners said, “where ideas like those are at a premium.”

“I can well imagine,” the monolith answered. “The wave-like emanations from you are blurred and indistinct, but I get impressions of strange and murderous creatures. Alas, Grisette is not alone in possessing them.”

For a moment the spacemen didn’t catch on to what the monolith had said. Then:

“You mean—you mean there *are* hostile creatures on Grisette?” Manners demanded. “How—?”

Spear rested his head in his hands. The whole thing was beginning to get too much for him.

“There are indeed,” the monolith explained. “I was hoping that you might be of help to us in that direction. You see, our structure and organisation make us an easy prey to parasites. Once, long ago, Grisette was free from them. But then they came from the skies, as you came, and we were not prepared for them in any way. For years now they have been eating us—us or me, whichever you prefer.”

Manners tried to adjust his mind to the situation. It

was difficult enough believing in the reality of such a vast stone being. To conceive of creatures which *ate* it was almost too much. Spear got up and strolled away towards the ship. He busied himself with some adjustment on the air-lock door, and then attended to his wound.

“These parasites,” Manners said, slowly. “What are they like?”

Only then did he remember that the monolith hadn’t explained how it knew of things around it—sight, sound or touch. He resolved to ask it when an opportunity presented itself.

“It might be better that you see them for yourselves,” the monolith said. “If you would follow me . . .”

Manners was at a loss. He couldn’t see for the moment how on Grisette he was to follow a stone column that couldn’t move. Then he realised that the voice was moving away from him, other columns farther away were “speaking.” He called out to Spear.

“Hey, Shiny! Snap out of it and bring some weapons. We’re going on safari!”

The gloomy expression of Spear’s face disappeared. This was something like! He jumped into the jeep, still containing its weapons, and drove it over to Manners. The navigator climbed aboard and they set the car to follow the monolith’s voice.

“I envy you your motility,” it said. “Not only can you move at will, but you have machines to carry you. A great advantage under adverse conditions. It could almost be a mutation for your survival. Now, about these parasites. They occupy practically the whole of the other hemisphere of Grisette. As I told you, once there was nothing on Grisette but myself—these monoliths and this flat stone. Then the invaders came from the skies and began to eat me away. Year by year they encroach still more on me. I fear that in a very few centuries I may all be gone.”

The voice had gathered speed and Spear needed all his driving skill to keep up with it, zig-zagging among the

monoliths. Very soon the ship was left far behind. Still the voice went on, explaining how the parasites made periodic raids, gobbled a few monoliths and an acre or two of stone, and then lay quiescent for a time.

"The pain is tremendous," it said. "Though lately I have been able to restrict it a little around the area of attack. In the beginning it spread over the whole bulk of me. I spent many nights screaming in agony to the unheeding sky. If you could help—in any way—my gratitude would surely match my size."

Even Spear felt touched by the appeal. Then he told himself that it was only a column of stone talking. Strangely enough, even that didn't make a lot of difference. Looking sideways, he could see that Manners was quite sold on the idea of helping the monolith. Spear sighed and cut sharply round a monolith. The next second his foot rammed down on the brake.

The voice had stopped its progress suddenly and for a good reason—there were no more monoliths to carry it. The flat stone came to a sudden, raw corroded end. Beyond was a surface that looked like plastic; shiny, smooth, even where it rose up in folds making little foothills and higher ones behind.

CHAPTER SIX

Parasites

"THIS," said the monolith, gravely, "is my farthest limit at the present time. At any moment the creatures may come and attack me again with their corroding juices. There will be another night of pain; another loss of what you might call limbs. And I am powerless to prevent it."

A slight pain in Spear's wrist reminded him of something. "See here," he said. "You hurled a rock at me. Why don't you do the same to them?"

"That is exactly what they would like me to do. It would be as if *you* tried to fight off your Earth lions by throwing your arms and legs to them. Only, these creatures would eat everything I threw to them—and everything I throw costs me a quantity of pain. I threw at you because the pain of parting with a small amount of my substance was smaller than the pain of your drill. Do you see, Earthman?"

Spear agreed that there seemed to be something in what the monolith said. Manners nodded sagely, then looked up suddenly.

"By the way," he said, "how *do* you manage to keep in touch with your environment?"

"Electromagnetic waves create disturbances in the 'nerve net' that mainly constitutes me," the monolith replied. "Of course, each monolith has only a vague 'vision,' but when you take into account that all the monoliths *and* the flat stone have the 'vision'—on all sides, too—then you may begin to see that I have a pretty clear idea of what is around me. I never sleep, by the way, this vision I speak of is constant."

"Himm," Manners responded. "That's all right for electro-magnetic phenomena, but what about sound?"

"Oh, well, I thought you would take it for granted that I am sensitive to vibrations in the atmosphere. Just as all of me is a brain and all of me is an eye, so all of me is an ear."

"And yet you don't feel pain when we walk on you and drive around in the jeep?"

"Oh, no. That is a question of maximum stimulation. Beyond a certain strength of stimuli, I do not feel anything. In the same way if someone should bring an axe down forcefully and sharply on your leg, you would not feel it—*not* until some time later."

Spear coughed. The discussion was getting a little too academic for him.

"These parasites," he put in, quickly. "Have you any idea how we could deal with them?"

The two men stared out over the smooth plastic towards the undulating shiny folds beyond. There was not a movement, not a sign of hostility anywhere. They turned and listened to the monolith.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't," it replied. "They are tricky things to deal with and, I should think, quite dangerous. I beseech you not to place yourselves in jeopardy on my account. There is little of you, but much of me."

The men stirred uncomfortably, then Spear had a sudden thought.

"Look here," he said to Manners. "I think we'd better do what the Commander says about priming the ship. I'll slip back in the jeep if you like. You can stay here and watch out for the heeby-jeebies—only, watch your step, won't you?"

Manners ignored the admonition. "How are you going to find your way back? Remember last night?"

That brought up another matter that Manners wanted to settle with the monolith. But that could wait.

"Why, I imagine our friend here will guide me back just

as—as—well, as *he* guided us out here. I imagine, too, that he can talk all over the place."

Manners chuckled at Spear's attack on his comparative anthropology. He turned to the monolith, which had remained silent during the exchange.

"I can do that quite easily, of course. When are you ready to go?"

"Now," Spear said, shortly.

"Very well, if you will follow me . . ."

Manners and Spear exchanged a nod and Spear climbed into the jeep. It was odd, Manners thought, to hear the same voice moving away from him with the jeep as kept on talking beside him. Evidently the monolith was able to split its attention quite successfully.

He wondered why it hadn't enquired what 'priming the ship' had meant. He felt the monolith had its share of curiosity—and that might explain last night's business.

Spear's jeep was disappearing behind a distant monolith as Manners turned back to the one beside him and asked:

"Tell me, it was you who moved our ship about yesterday, wasn't it?"

The monolith sounded apologetic. "It was indeed. I am sorry if it inconvenienced you. But you see, I had no idea when you landed what you were or what your ship was. Those parasites landed in something quite different. I saw you and your friend come out and heard your strange language, but I didn't know whether you were simply small parts of a whole—whether the ship was really the principle organism. So I moved it about and tried to get in contact with it. I was just giving it up when you and your friend returned. I called out 'Greetings' but you didn't reply and I supposed I had made a mistake in constructing your language from the words I could hear you saying as you drove around. I spent all night going over my process of construction and made another approach this morning."

"Well, that clears that up," Manners said. "It didn't really bother us, just made us a little nervous. We thought

you were probably termites of some sort!"

"Termites," repeated the monolith. "Termites. I'm afraid I'm not able to construct a meaning for that word. Could you help me to understand you better?"

Manners proceeded to give the monolith a lecture in the elementary biology of the termite, describing the way they build great towers without having the faintest idea of what they are doing.

"Not a very flattering picture," the monolith said, when Manners was finished. "But I suppose you have changed your mind about me now?"

"Oh, yes, of course. But I'm still puzzled as to how you managed to move the ship. You say you have no organs of locomotion. I take it then that you have no organs of touch and grasping?"

"That is so," the monolith began, "you see I am constructed in such a way that—turn around, please!"

Instinctively obeying instantly, Manners realised suddenly that he wouldn't be having that explanation just yet.

He was now facing the plastic surface—or what had once been a plastic surface. Now it was covered with what looked like an army of people from the future trying to be knights of the past. They stretched from the foothills in the background right up to within a few hundred yards of him and the monolith.

Swarms of them swept forward like locusts on Earth, patching the plastic surface with dark blobs of swaying brilliance. For the morning sun shone down on them and glistened brightly from the plastic suits of armour they were wearing.

Manners, rooted in amazement, could make out the shape of a plastic head-covering and extensions for a couple of arms and what appeared to be four legs. They stood about five feet high, but their features were indistinguishable behind the dazzling plastic. They seemed to move on their four lower limbs, using the upper ones for waving.

Manners suddenly realised that the only sound he could

hear was the apprehensive moaning of the monolith, which obviously knew what was in store for it. And yet the parasites seemed to be getting some sort of orders. They were deploying. Again Manners came to with a start and realised that the dark mass of invaders was fanning out so as to sweep by on either side of him and the nearest monolith.

Then he saw the atypical thing among the parasites. It was a taller armour suit, with only two legs and two arms. Again the features were indistinguishable behind the reflected sunlight.

Still with no sound, the invaders suddenly picked up speed and moved forward at a terrific pace. Manners snapped out of it, turned and ran. But the parasites were now moving too fast for him. In the corners of his eyes he could see them swarm past him on either side.

Strangely enough, they seemed to be keeping parallel with him rather than trying to close in on him. Nevertheless he forced his legs to pound down on the stone and ran between the monoliths in the direction that didn't have to lead anywhere but away from the parasites.

Then something touched one of his feet and he went down. The stone came up at him with tremendous force and nearly knocked the breath from him. At the back of his mind a picture was forming of what these creatures could do to him if they could eat stone. He tried to sit up, but found a heavy weight on his back.

Two plastic-encased arms came round him and lifted. He felt the whole of his body leave the ground. And then he was being borne away at a jerking, jolting pace. He was facing away from the direction in which he was being carried, and could see that the jeep had suddenly appeared among the monoliths.

All around, the four-footed parasites were at work on the stone. An arm of them swept across in front of the jeep and a mass of rising steam blotted the vehicle from view. Silently Manners breathed a prayer for Spear, then breathed several for himself. The screen of steam was ad-

vancing on his bearer. It was as though the four-footers had been ordered to leave a path for them and had now been told to close it by attacking the stone. In the air was the piercing collective scream of a thousand monoliths.

Manners spared a glance for the two arms that were unfolding him. The plastic was near now and there was no blinding reflection. Through he looked—and almost stopped breathing. The stuff inside was as near human flesh as human flesh could be.

Jerking himself in the grip, he forced his head round to see the rest of the creature that was carrying him. It was difficult to hold on to his reason—that is, if he hadn't already lost it.

Inside the plastic armour was—something that looked like a very beautiful and very human girl.

To Spear, as he climbed into the jeep and turned its bonnet in the direction of the scooter, he was living in a dream world that would sometime explode into reality. Until then, he had to accept the observable fact that he was being spoken to by a column of stone. Several stone columns, in fact. For the voice moved forward, keeping just in front of him all the while. In the early stages he could also hear the other voice talking to Manners, then it faded out and there was only one.

"I'm sorry if I distracted you from your duty," the monolith said. "It was selfish of me to drag you off like that and plunge you into my troubles."

"Don't think about it any more," Spear replied genuinely. "Only too pleased to be of help. It won't take me long to do what I have to do, then we'll go back and you can tell us more about the parasites."

The monoliths thanked him for his sympathy. "If ever I can help you, just let me know. Though," it finished lamely, "I can't see how I *could* help you."

"You never know," said Spear, expertly steering round the last monolith that had spoken and heading towards the

next. "By the way, how come you managed to move the ship around last night? I don't know a lot of biology, but you don't seem to have the necessary apparatus to do it. It was you, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, it was," the monolith replied. It made the same explanation to him as it was going to make to Manners. "The mechanism is one of energy transference. You see, these columns are only kept up by a heavy charge of neuronal impulses to counteract gravitational forces. If I let the impulse pass out of a column, it sinks back to level ground again. Of course, to maintain the status quo I have to raise another column somewhere else."

Spear frowned. He could never understand why these brainy people couldn't answer a question directly, but had to go into a lot of theory. Then he brightened up as the monolith continued.

"That's how I moved your ship. By raising a column under it, then another one very near the first and so on. The ship passed from the top of one column to the top of another. Of course, the columns were not as high as these—I wouldn't have had enough available energy to make them if they were."

In spite of himself, Spear found himself getting interested. "Why do you keep all these columns in this particular pattern and at this particular height?" he asked.

"Well, you see, I have an innate conception of—aaaaieee!"

Spear's nerves seemed to shudder in resonance with the monolith's wailing cry. He brought his foot down on the brake, turned the jeep round and started her up again. He had a rough idea what had caused that wail.

"Quickly!" the monolith screamed. "The parasites are coming. Follow me quickly, I cannot talk coherently much more and you will be lost. Hurry, hurry!"

Spear needed no urging. His foot went down on the accelerator. The jeep leaped forward, careening past the monoliths with a scraping of paint, its tyres growling angrily

as they skidded on the stone. Spear's fingers were clamped tight over the steering wheel, jerking it back and forth as he followed the crazy zigzag path laid out by the monoliths.

All the while, the stone screamed. "There are hordes of them! More than ever before. And the strange one is among them!"

Momentarily Spear wondered what the thing was driveling about. What was this strange one? Then he cast the thought away. It didn't matter. The important thing was to get to Manners. Suddenly he cursed the monolith's habit of stopping with a jerk. Coming quickly from behind a monolith, he saw the parasites, Manners and the strange one.

The parasites shone under the sunlight, casting spears of light into his eyes. He brought the jeep to an abrupt halt, but remained seated in it. Protecting his eyes from the brilliant sparkle of the parasites, he could see that Manners had already been carried off by the strange one—the one that looked different from the rest in that it had only two legs.

On either side of the retreating figures, the parasites were swarming over the stone, raising steam as they went. Then, a second or two after the jeep stopped, the two opposite arms of the attacking force swept together and met in front of him. A hissing wall of steam rose up, blotting out the figure of Manners and his bearer, and effectively cutting off any hope of rescuing him.

The parasites rolled over the stone like a tide of molten plastic. Spear watched the edge of the tide. It came within twenty yards of him and then stopped. He watched it still, trying to get some idea of how the parasites worked. He knew the attack would come to an end sometime, and that would be the time to start looking for Manners. Until then he could best serve the cause by studying the creatures.

He could see them among the steam clouds. At first they appeared to be chaotic, but as he watched Spear could see that they were, in fact, orderly. Each one moved in a straight line on its four legs and seemed to be doing some-

thing to the ground with its arms.

Spear reached out a pair of binoculars and studied the beasts more closely. He could see now that within the plastic suits, they were mainly a mass of dark fluid, with darker spots that perhaps were organs. One darkish spot lay at the top of each arm. Moving the field of view downwards, Spear saw that little pools of the dark liquid were ejected from the ends of the arms—much as a fly ejects juices. As soon as the fluid touched the stone great clouds of steam rose. At the same time, the creatures' heads lowered and sucked at the broiling liquid on the ground.

The stone was corroded away to a depth of about a foot. Whether there was stone below that, Spear could not see, for as soon as that level was reached, the parasites exuded a glairy colourless fluid that seemed to set at once into the plastic surface that extended to the hills. Then they moved on to the next area of stone.

When they came to a monolith, the sight was awe-inspiring. Several of them would attack a column, slavering their juices over its apex. The whole thing would turn into a steaming mass, and the parasites would gradually work their way down the column until they had eaten it away to a foot below ground level.

Chemistry, to Spear, was something that rather queer people went in for. All the same, he had had to learn a little elementary chemistry in his student days. Most of it was gone now, and what little remained was decidedly rusty. Nevertheless, he thought it might be useful if he had some idea how these creatures did what they did.

Sitting in the jeep watching them, oblivious to the moaning and wailing of the stone, Spear searched the dark recesses of his memory for facts that would explain the present situation.

Stone, he thought, was siliceous—at least, terrestrial stone was, and the monolith had said this was very similar. Now what could turn siliceous material into steam?

Fluorine. Fluorine would react with silica—silicon dioxide—to give—to give—heck, what did it give? Ah, yes, silicon fluoride. No, that wouldn't work. It would have to be hydrofluoric acid. *That* would give silicon fluoride and water. The reaction would be fast enough to cause the water to be vaporised. But wait a minute. Silicon fluoride was decomposed by water—

Spear's chemical cogitations were cut short before he was able to settle the question finally. For the ground suddenly gave way beneath the jeep and he sank down with it far beneath the ground level.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Attack in the Hills

FOR some seconds Manners figured he must be having hallucinations. The presence of a girl on Grisette didn't tally at all with the barren terrain of the place, with the great stone creature, with the swarming parasites. Nor did her enormous strength add credulity to the situation. She carried him fast and effortlessly, high from the ground.

He turned his attention once again to the body within the plastic suit. The skin of the girl's arm was as white as his own, and he could make out a very fine fair down on its surface. He felt a thrill run through him, which was odd, because the hard plastic suit gave him no indication of the softness or warmth of her body. Maybe his imagination was supplying those details.

On and on she ran, towards the hills. Very soon, the swarming hordes of parasites were left far behind them. Still the girl did not slow her pace, nor transfer him to the ground, where he would have been infinitely more comfortable. She kept him tight against her, the joints of her suit cutting into him and rubbing sorely with the constant jerking.

He tried to get a better view of her, but the jolting motion made her image blurred. All he could tell was that she was very lovely and very determined. She never looked down at him once.

Then he felt her slowing. Twisting his head, Manners saw that they had reached the hills and were passing through a narrow defile between high gleaming walls of plastic. The defile followed a tortuous route into the deeps

of the hills. Then, suddenly rounding a bend, he saw the house.

At first, he didn't realise it *was* a house. It looked more like a palace from one of the ancient fairy tales he had learned in mythology. High, shining in the sun and strangely transparent all over, it stood on a little rise from the defile—like the barons' castles of long ago. He almost expected to see a moat and drawbridge.

The girl carried him straight to the house, and only when she had passed through the entrance into the transparent hallway did she set him on his feet.

Manners stretched himself, as much to give himself a chance to think as to get the blood circulating properly. This was a situation without parallel in his experience. He was a little at a loss how to deal with it. The girl, however, took the initiative. She ignored him and stripped off her plastic suit.

The helmet came off first, revealing a sun-tanned skin, bright blue-green eyes and a mass of long, fair hair, that disappeared into the neck of the suit.

Then off came the tunic and the rest of the hair was exposed, running down to beyond her waist. Followed the armlets and the pieces that fitted over legs and feet. Tossing the plastic aside, the girl stood erect in her bright crimson two-piece sunsuit. Her bare feet made a little cloud of condensation on the plastic floor.

Manners smiled. His best smile. The smile he always used when things were just a little beyond his reach. The smile that usually brought them within his reach.

The girl smiled. Her smile was as full and friendly as Manners' and it showed that her dentition was based on the terrestrial mammalian plan.

She held out her hand. Manners took it eagerly. It was small, smooth-skinned and delightfully dusky from sunlight. Just the diminutive, soothing kind of hand one needs to find on a girl from the south sea islands. The next second Manners' smile vanished. He was quite unable to main-

tain it at the same time as he strove not to show the pain running up his arm from her grip. He managed to free his hand, glanced at her biceps with admiration, and put his smile on again. Apparently, they were friends.

Manners pointed to himself. "Dirk," he said, a little loudly, the way Englishmen always speak to foreigners. "Dirk Manners." He then pointed at the girl, raised his eyebrows inquisitively.

"I am called Aylees," the girl said. "And you are Dirk Manners."

The consternation on his face must have shown plainly, for Aylees suddenly burst into hearty mocking laughter, letting her head fall back so that he could see the throbbing muscles in her neck. Through all the consternation, he thought she looked very beautiful.

"You—you speak English, then?" he said.

"If that is the name of your language, then I speak it," Aylees admitted, still laughing. "You want to know how. I will tell you. You call yourself and your kind human. Well, I am not human"—Manners caught himself thinking that she was human enough for him—"and I do not think quite as you do—but, won't you come and eat with me?"

Her eyes and hands expressed the invitation more pleasantly than her lips. He nodded. She turned and he followed her through a doorway into an inner room. There he saw plastic tables and chairs of unusual design and, in one corner of the room, a stack of plastic containers, apparently of food.

She set a chair at the table for him and gestured him to be seated. Then she went over to the stack of food and began sorting through the containers. Manners saw her pick up a jar that contained something bright and pink, look at it for a few seconds then put it down again. She turned her attention to other jars.

She came half-way across to the table with an armful of containers, and then, as if abruptly changing her mind, went back and brought the pink one, too.

"I'd been saving this," she said, candidly, "but this is a special occasion, so we'll take the plunge."

Manners eyed the container warily. Not that he suspected her of any ulterior motive—if she had wanted to, she could have crushed the life out of him some time back. But she had said herself that she wasn't human—and non-human foods might not agree with Manners' system of assimilation.

"It's all right," Aylees said, smiling at him. "You'll love it. It's really delicious. That's why I've been saving it, but that part of the story comes later on. 'Dive in' is the term you normally use, I think?"

So saying, she drew up her own chair and began to ply Manners with food. The containers opened at the flick of a lever, and the food was eaten from them with built-in implements. While he ate, Aylees explained.

"As I was saying, I do not think as you do, not really. I have—my whole race has—what you call telepathy. A very extended and efficient telepathy. While I carried you here, I was able to search your mind and read things there."

Manners coloured slightly. As he remembered it, he had thought one or two things that might cause an Earth girl to be embarrassed. But Aylees only smiled more broadly.

"Then your Earth girls must be very unrealistic," she commented. "I found your thoughts most natural, very similar to those of the young men of my race."

With a start, Manners realised that all his mental workings must be open to her. She knew what he was thinking as he sat there.

"Of course I do," Aylees laughed. "You will get used to it. I may even be able to teach you to do the same. Anyway, while I carried you here, I managed to form a clear knowledge of your language—you think in words mainly; just a few pictures here and there where the words might shame you! I already know quite a bit about you. Since you were so similar to me, I ordered those—those *things* to give you a miss. Otherwise you would have been

corroded pretty nastily."

"I must thank you for saving my life," Manners said, a little ponderously because of the horrible picture that arose in his mind.

Aylees laughed her brilliant laugh. "It was selfish of me really. You see, I have been very lonely here with only those things for company. I wanted you alive as a companion."

Her words set up a train of thought in Manners' mind that he hastily tried to shut off by thinking hard about other things. The slow smile on Aylees' face and the dark twinkle in her eyes showed him that he hadn't succeeded.

He coughed. "Er—where did you come from?" he asked. "I take it you're not a native of Grisette?"

Aylees shuddered. "Oh, no! My planet is beautiful. It has flowers and trees and real people with minds. It isn't barren and devoid of intelligent life as this place is!"

The warmth of her tone told Manners that she could probably be something of a demon if roused. There was a kind of fire behind her irises that brought a thrilling tension into him. Hastily he pressed on with neutral things.

"This planet of yours, how come you left it?"

Aylees finished the food from her container, turned half away from the table and stretched out her long, smooth legs. Manners looked her full in the eyes.

"We were out in space—a bunch of us on a joyride. It was a regular thing. Only, we went too far, got lost. "Oh, we'd have found our way back in the end, but these things got us first."

"You mean the parasites?" Manners queried.

"Yes. They came at us in swarms—much as you saw them go for the stone out there. Point is, they can also eat metal. They ate our ship."

There was a moment's silence while Aylees stared down at the floor. Then she continued. "They ate the ship and everybody on it—including my parents and my fiancé. I

was lucky. I was outside at the time, taking a look at the stars, and I was wearing a plastic spacesuit. Their juices don't attack plastic. But they got me all the same. Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better to have died back there with the others. But I'm glad now that I didn't—since you came."

She lifted her face and gave him a long, cool stare. He coughed again and spoke rapidly. "They brought you down here, I suppose? Made you prisoner?"

"That's it. This was the planet my swarm settled on. There are many others with other swarms. The parasites are spreading all through the galaxy, corroding, killing, laying waste. And yet—they replace the stone, the trees, the flowers with this beautiful plastic. It's part of their metabolism—a sort of waste product."

Manners stared around at the smooth, shiny walls. Some waste product. It would be worth a considerable sum on Earth.

"So I became their queen," Aylees laughed cynically. "I could have committed suicide, I suppose, but even a living death is better than no life at all—once you've experienced it. I knew I had to die soon, anyway—my food stores are getting low."

She glanced across at the stack of containers. Manners followed her glance, surmised that she must have rescued the food from the ship.

"That's right," Aylees agreed. "These parasites, although not intelligent, have a certain amount of sentience. They allowed me to bring the food. In fact, they brought it for me. In return, I taught them a few things; how to make their suits, for example. I was able to reach their minds—such as they are."

"A while back," Manners said, "you remarked that there was no intelligent life on Grisette. What about the stone?"

Aylees raised her eyebrows in a puzzled expression. "The stone?" she repeated. "How do you mean?"

"The stone is intelligent. It talked to me and my friend,

explained how these parasites attack it periodically and that they came from the skies. Didn't mention you, though."

"How odd," Aylees commented. "It must have a mind of a different form from the kind available to mine. And you say you have a friend. I didn't detect another mind when we attacked. Where was he?"

"He had gone back to our ship," Manners explained. "Some distance behind those monoliths."

"That is it, then. My searching powers are limited by distance. Obviously I couldn't reach him." Her eyes lit up again. "Is he like you? Can we go and fetch him?"

An unreasoned jealousy sprang uncalled into Manners' mind. The thought of Spear being brought here by the girl was distasteful to him—although he knew he had nothing to fear from happily married, slightly misogynistic, Spear.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Aylees laughed. "You must never underestimate the power of a woman's charms!"

Manners inwardly cursed her powers of mind reading. This was going to be difficult.

"If it annoys you, I will turn it off," Aylees smiled. "I know your language well enough now not to need it. Shall I do that?"

Manners had the ungallant thought that he wouldn't know whether she had it on or not—in which case he would have to be watchful all the time.

"You malign me," Aylees admonished him. "If I say I will turn it off, then I will. Now, don't be a jealous idiot. We've got to rescue your friend."

"From what?" Manners asked, surprised. "I should have thought the main task was to rescue you."

"Ideally, we would do the two jobs at the same time," Aylees said. "Anyway, we've got to get to your friend before the parasites take it into their fluid heads to attack him."

Manners jumped to his feet. He had never given the

matter any thought; Aylees had rather taken his mind off Spear.

"How do we know they haven't already done so?" he said. "Maybe they are attacking him even now!" He moved towards the door.

Aylees called him to halt. She looked a little distracted, as though thinking of something else. "No, they haven't attacked him yet, I am sure. Knowing them so long my mind can reach theirs over long distances. But—" She hesitated.

"But what?" Manners asked, coming close to her. "There's something else worrying you?"

"Yes," Aylees admitted. "It's so difficult—their minds are so hazy. They seem to be thinking—thinking that something has gone wrong; that an external force is acting against them—they have had complete freedom for so long."

She rounded on Manners suddenly. "D'you suppose your friend has done something to them?"

It was a new idea, but not a strange one, knowing Spear. "It wouldn't surprise me" he answered. "Would that worry you?"

"Not in itself," Aylees replied. "But—yes, I knew it! The parasites are thinking that I am responsible for this. Whatever your friend has done to them they are blaming on me. Oh, they're turning back. They are going to attack *me*!"

Manners had never seen anything quite like it before. Aylees' voice was fraught with concern, yet there was no fear there. Nor did her face or stance suggest that she was afraid for herself. Rather, her whole being indicated that she was merely considering it a blot on the even tenor of life that an angry swarm of stone-corroding parasites should attack her. Then he found the answer in her next remark.

"That means an end to my plans for rescuing your friend and the bunch of us escaping. Oh, well, it could be worse."

"Could it?" Manners asked. "In what way, for Pete's sake!"

Aylees looked at him strangely. "Why, they *might* have been able to get at us for one thing. Inside this plastic house we're quite safe from them. It just means we shan't be able to get out. Food will run out in time and we shall starve, but we will at least have each other for company until we do."

Manners stared at her in amazement. He would never have thought that such a strong, healthy minded woman would take such a situation so calmly and so helplessly.

"That may be all right for you," he said, firmly. "But I've got a job to do and a friend to find. *I'm* not staying here to rot."

"But, Dirk, there's nothing you can do! The parasites will surround the place. There'll be no way out—and even if there were, what could you do to fight them?"

Manners had been staring at the door. He now turned back to Aylees.

"I don't know," he said. "But we'd better do some thinking pretty quick. Intelligent or not, the parasites have brought a chunk of rock and are drilling away at your front door."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ditched

IT was one of the most peculiar sensations Spear had ever experienced. One moment he was sitting in the jeep on firm stone ground, watching the corroding parasites. The next moment the ground seemed to have turned to some kind of rubber. Soft rubber, because he sank, jeep and all, far down below the surrounding level. Looking up, he could see the sky as a roughly rectangular shape high above him.

Down there in the pit, the groans and wails of the stone sounded hollowly eerie. A sharp twinge of fear came to him as he thought that the parasites might come tumbling down the pit after him. Then he realised that their tide-front was too far away for that, and was probably ebbing now, anyway.

As the fear died, so indignation took its place. He had a sudden humiliating vision of himself sitting passively in the jeep inside a great big hole. That was enough. Rapidly he turned the jeep's wheels into sucking tracks and started the motor. Letting in the clutch he inched towards the side of the pit.

The bonnet of the jeep touched the wall—and stopped. Spear backed an inch or two and tried again. The jeep refused to climb. Leaning over the side, Spear could see that the curving sucker tracks just couldn't get a purchase on the wall. Unlike the monoliths, it had no gentle curve at its base.

Irritably, Spear clambered over to the rear of the jeep and jumped up and down on it, trying to tip the vehicle up so that the tracks would engage with the wall. But the car

simply shuddered and complained metallically without doing as he wished.

Spear became aware of a voice above and among the groaning and wailing. The monolith was talking again, its voice strained as though forced out by an effort against the pressing need to scream.

"Why are you trying to get out?" it groaned. "You are safe there. That's why I made the pit for you. If the parasites see you they will attack you and kill you. Just sit there in your vehicle until they have gone—ooooh!"

The voice tailed off into a particularly nasty groan. Spear wrinkled his brow. So the monolith had done it to protect him from the parasites? Very kind of it, although a little late in the day, seeing that Spear had watched the swarms for some seconds before the pit had appeared.

Then Spear's original thought returned to him, but this time there was no fear with it.

"Hey, monolith!" he called. "Hey, there, Stone!"

He waited while the groaning gradually turned itself into coherent talk. "What—what is it, Earthman?"

"Say, if you can make pits like these without any trouble, why don't you make a long one—right round the edge of the attackers? Maybe it wouldn't really stop them corroding you, but it'd certainly disorganise them a bit if they found themselves all pouring into a vast drain."

Suddenly the moaning stopped. It was as if Spear's remark had provoked a thought that required all the stone's nervous responses, leaving none over to react to the pain of corrosion. That in itself, Spear thought, was a respite after all, even if nothing more came of his idea.

But the stone decided more *would* come of it. "You know," it said, "I'd never thought of that—as I told you, I was completely unprepared for them when they landed; and centuries of peaceful contemplation cannot be swept aside in a year or two."

"You don't have to excuse yourself," Spear laughed. "Not

just now, anyway. Main point is, are you going to form a ditch?"

"Yes, yes," the monolith replied. "I am indeed. I'm gathering the energy potentials now. Very soon they'll be tumbling into the drain like ninepins. That was a marvellous idea of yours!"

Spear smiled grimly. Centuries of peaceful contemplation hadn't altered what was probably a fundamental characteristic of all living things, terrestrial or alien—the joy of successful battle against other living things. The monolith was positively taking pleasure in the prospect of ditching a few of the parasites. Quite a contrast to its usual tranquil, slightly pacifistic attitude. Spear hoped he hadn't sown the seed of belligerency.

The monolith had relapsed into silence. Or, at least, it wasn't talking any more. There were still odd groans and wails—as particularly painful shards ran through the creature's nerve net, Spear supposed.

Then, quite abruptly, it said: "Now! The energy's there. Now for the ditch!"

Spear, expecting something at least a little dramatic, was sorely disappointed when nothing obvious happened. The groaning had ceased, but all he could hear was the faraway faint hiss of steam as the hordes continued their decomposition of the mineral. The seconds ticked by as Spear sat there waiting. Then suddenly the monolith spoke again. Its voice was high-filled with exultance, infectious in its eagerness.

"Aha! They're routed! In complete confusion. Do you hear me, Earthman? I've triumphed over them! Hundreds of them have fallen into the ditch. The rest are panicking. They don't know what's happened to them. This is the first time they've met with an obstacle—and they're completely disorganised! I've beaten them!"

Spear pulled a wry face, even though there was no one there to see it. "Don't get carried away," he warned. "You haven't done quite as much as that. They can still attack you, you know. You haven't injured them at all."

"You're wrong, you're wrong!" the monolith crowed. "They are breaking up their lines. Retreating! The whole swarm has turned on its heel. Even the ones that fell in the ditch are climbing out and running away. They've stopped corroding me. This is my hour of triumph!"

Spear, down in his little pit, was getting a little tired of the boasting commentary. "Well, if you can spare a moment from these thoughts, perhaps you could arrange for me to be transported back to the surface!"

At once the monolith was all apology. "Of course, of course, my dear Earthman. How selfish of me! In my joy at routing these hideous parasites, I forgot about your location. Forgive me—I will raise you at once. You, too, shall see the glorious spectacle of the parasites in full flight!"

It was almost like a mania, Spear thought. Very soon the monolith would have a depressive phase and slobber out its hardships. However, in the meantime, it was as good as its word.

The stone beneath the jeep gradually rose. It was uncanny—rather like being at the base of a serpent's tongue as it slowly opened outwards. Smoothly and gently Spear rose up until he could see above the top of the pit. Then a second or so later, there was no pit or sign of a pit. The ground was perfectly level and even.

Looking forward, Spear could see that the monolith had good reason for its joy. The flashing swarms of plastic-suited parasites were streaming away towards the hill, a few stragglers from the ditch frantically trying to make up the distance between themselves and the main swarm.

Spear drove the jeep forward and took a look at the ditch. The monolith had certainly made a good job of it. It was wide and deep, and Spear was at a loss to explain how the parasites had managed to get out of it. Then he saw that they had corroded away the sides into steps. He envied them their fluids. He, a mere human, had had to stay in his pit.

By now the hordes of parasites was nearing the hills. Over there, Spear remembered was where he had seen the strange one carry Manners. It was time he did something about that.

"I must go to find my friend," he told the monolith. "Will you close the ditch for me to cross?"

"And leave me alone?" the monolith wailed. Spear knew it was not fear that prompted the remark, but sadness at not having anyone to tell its prowess to.

"I'm afraid so. But I'll be back. With my friend. Until then, you can look after our ship for us."

"Very well," the monolith said, sadly. "I will guard it carefully. But I am afraid for you, travelling out there among the parasites."

"I've been among worse things," Spear said, grimly. "Besides, it's a job that has to be done."

Even as they spoke, Spear could see that a part of the ditch was closing up. Soon there was a perfect bridge across it. Calling a parting word to the monolith, Spear let the clutch in and drove the jeep forward over the bridge.

Then he was on the plastic surface, heading toward the hills—and what lay among them.

Manners saw the first twinge of fear come into Aylees' eyes as she stared at the front door. Through it could be seen the plastic-clad parasites, with their swirling dark fluids. Two of them were close against the door, holding a piece of pointed stone, twisting it against the plastic door with their front limbs.

Already there was an area of semi-opacity where the improvised drill had scraped off the polish from the door.

But even through her fear, Aylees retained her attitude of efficiency.

"How long will it take them to get through, d'you suppose?" she queried. "Not long enough, anyway. I reckon."

"No," Manners replied, pleased that he wouldn't have a

hysterical female to deal with on top of the parasites. Hysterical females were all right under some circumstances, but not when there were things to be thought out and things to do. "No, not long enough. I reckon an hour or two will see them through. D'you know what an hour is?"

Ayles smiled. "Already your mind is telling me that it is sixty minutes, each of which is sixty seconds. And you have formed a pretty clear impression of that length of time. So I think I know what an hour is."

"Umm," said Manners. "I thought you said you'd turn off the black magic side of things."

"I did turn it off," she said. She shrugged. "I just turned it on for a second to get an idea of what an hour was."

"Umm," Manners said again. "Oh well, there are more important things to talk about at the moment. Have you any idea what makes these things tick?"

"The parasites? Well, of course, they are mainly fluid—a fluid that attacks and corrodes stone and practically everything else."

"They actually live on the stone, do they? I mean, they really do eat it?"

"Yes—modified, of course, by their juices. It seems that attacked stone disappears entirely and becomes parasite food and water. What you call steam."

"Then I should think they are mainly composed of what we call hydrofluoric acid. That reacts with silica—stone—to form water and hydrofluosilicic acid. There are several intermediate products, of course. Point is, what happens to the hydrofluosilicic acid?"

"Oh, I expect they turn it into this plastic they secrete," Ayles suggested. "They produce masses of it, you know."

"Maybe we'll think of something connected with that," Manners suggested, turning away. "Now perhaps I'd better see the rest of the house. You don't seem to have any other doors."

"That's right, only the front one. There's no need, is

there?—or there wasn't, with just me living here."

"Pity," Manners said. "More doors would have held them up a bit longer. However . . ." He turned away and walked across the room, ignoring the drilling parasites.

A doorway without a door led from the first room into a second. One or two pieces of plastic furniture were dotted about, very rough in construction and badly finished. In one corner a flight of crude steps led upwards. Manners went towards them.

"How did you manage to build this place without any tools?" he asked.

"It wasn't too difficult," Aylees replied, following him to the stairs. "The parasites regarded me as their queen and were prepared to do almost anything I asked of them. They made the place in sheets to my specification and then cemented them together with their juices. That's why things don't look factory finished."

"I think you did extremely well under the circumstances," Manners commented, mounting the stairs. "It's not a job I'd like to tackle."

At the top of the stairs there was what appeared to be a landing. On second look, Manners realised it was a room. It appeared to be the room in which Aylees slept; it could hardly be called a bedroom, for there was no bed. There was the remains of her plastic spacesuit, a few empty food containers and—strangest of all—a wilted flower.

Manners forgot the urgency of the moment and went across to it. He picked it up and stared at it, then turned enquiring eyes to Aylees.

"It was caught in my space suit," she explained. "We had lots of flower boxes on the ship. I preserved it as best I could with water condensed from the parasite's steam, but it wilted just the same."

Manners returned his stare to the flower. On the whole of Grisetete there was but this one flower, this one piece of vegetation. Aylees had nurtured it as a treasure. And it had wilted. He turned to her suddenly.

"When we're out of this," he said, eagerly, "I'll give you a whole garden of flowers! You can have—" His enthusiasm was cut short by the realisation that he hadn't the faintest idea what was going to happen to Aylees when they were 'out of this.' Maybe she wouldn't want to leave Grisetete. Maybe the Commander wouldn't allow her aboard the big ship in case of infection. Maybe—maybe they wouldn't be able to get to the big ship anyway.

Aylees was watching him. "Thank you for those thoughts, Dirk, and all that they mean," she said. "Even if we don't get out of this, they'll still mean the same thing."

Manners looked across at her. She stood there in a shaft of sunlight-fair hair, blue eyes, svelte body white in contrast to the scarlet sunsuit. He had to look away again quickly; to turn his mind—force his mind back to the matter in hand. The important matter of getting away from the parasites. All else—and there was a lot else—depended on that.

"I—er—is there a way out onto the roof of this place?" he asked.

Aylees smiled and nodded. He felt pretty sure she hadn't turned off the black magic that time!

She led him across the sleeping room and into another. Manners could see that one of the transparent walls looked out through a gap in the hills towards where the stone was. He could see a monolith or two; wondered what Spear was doing over there. Then he looked up to where Aylees was pointing. There was a square hole in the ceiling.

"This is a sort of observation room," she laughed. "I used to come up here and look out across the hills contemplating things—wishing, wanting, waiting. I don't do that any more."

Again Manners looked at her, felt a wrench inside him and looked away again.

"And you went up there when you wanted some air, I suppose?"

"That's right. It used to get very hot in here. I would

swing myself up and sit on the flat roof. Sometimes I'd lie on my back and stare up at the sky, wondering if there could be such a coincidence as to bring a space ship to this barren planet—and if so, whether it would land near me."

Manners was standing near her, his arm brushing hers. He felt annoyed that the thick tunic stopped him feeling the softness of her skin.

"It must have been very lonely," he said.

Then, he stepped sharply aside, thrust his hands into the air and grabbed the edge of the hole in the ceiling. With a quick hoist he was up and through the hole, scrambling out onto the flat room. He glimpsed a large, plastic, rain-collecting tank. A second later, Aylees drew up beside him.

Creeping carefully towards the front edge of the roof, Manners could look down and see the parasites at their drilling operations. If only he had a spraygun . . .

Still, even a spit-pistol might cause a bit of a disturbance. He pulled the weapon from its holster, levelled it at the parasite holding the drill tight against the door and pulled the trigger—

CHAPTER NINE

Acid Bath

GRISETTE'S afternoon was coming down as Spear raced the jeep across the smooth plastic surface. The whole landscape looked like a piece of table-top photography—unreal and possessing a shine that seemed to come from varnish. The plastic stretched away into the distance like a sheet of glass, then rose up unnaturally into the folds of the foothills. Behind them, the hills themselves soared up in a blaze of gleaming semi-transparency, some of them with flat tops, others sweeping up gracefully in smooth curves such as nature never produces.

At least, that's what Spear was thinking as he moved towards them. He was pretty sure those hills had never 'happened' the way hills on Earth happened. They had been made, he felt certain. In which case, they must have been made by the parasites; he had already seen them pouring out the fluid plastic that immediately set into the solid sheet.

The hills, Spear imagined, must be the living space of the parasites, their hideout, so to speak. Though what they had to hide from, he couldn't think.

The foothills came nearer. Still there was no sign of the parasites, which had moved even faster than the jeep. Spear edged the jeep up to the foothills, then stopped. He suddenly realised that he hadn't any plan of action.

Somewhere in there was Manners, the parasites and whatever it had been that had carried Manners there—the thing

the stone called 'the strange one.' Spear's job, as he saw it, was simply to get Manners out again. All else followed upon that. Until that was done there was no question of carrying out anything that the Old Man might construe as duty. Spear and Manners had been together on too many jaunts for altruistic ideals about duty to bother him. Life came first, after that—duty.

At the back of his mind, Spear also was aware that he and Manners were far too valuable to be thrown away on a sterile planet of stone and hydrofluoric acid, unless it was unavoidable. "Those who search and fight away, live to search another day."

That was all very well, but how to do it? Spear was optimistic enough to assume that Manners was still in a state that could be rescued and not distributed in small pieces among whatever passed as stomachs on the parasites. Even so, there would probably be trouble getting him out. The idea was to keep that trouble to a minimum.

Staying where he was, Spear thought, would be of no use whatever. There simply wasn't enough data to work on. He let the jeep creep forward again, this time heading for the nearest defile among the foothills.

The defile led curvaceously into the interior. Spear followed its curves cautiously. At last he turned a bend and saw them.

Thousands of them were milling about, blocking his further progress, the falling sun glinting on their plastic carapaces. They appeared to be dancing, yet the whole thing looked sinister—like the exorcising dances of ancient Africa.

Spear edged forward an inch or two at a time, waiting for them to spot him, ready to beat an immediate retreat. He could see above them that the defile led still further away from him, bending again quite near.

The parasites continued their dance—ignoring him completely.

Spear stopped the jeep about two inches from the nearest

dancing parasite and sat back with a puzzled expression. Then it came to him. The things were blind! They had no idea he was there!

But wait a minute—how had they known where to go after leaving the stone? How had they found the defile? A few moments' reflection and Spear came to the conclusion that the parasites were blind, but had a highly developed sense of direction-finding. Just so long as a thing didn't move without their knowledge, they knew where it was—as surely as a blind man walks safely from room to room, provided the doors are *not* left open.

That, he thought, was very advantageous.

Slipping in the clutch, gritting his teeth against the slaughter that was going to occur, he drove the jeep forward into the seething masses.

On occasions like these, Spear's ideas were quite clear. The parasites had brought destruction upon themselves. True, the Earthmen need not have landed on Grisette, but a race that was entitled to be spared such destruction would be one that did no hostile thing towards peaceful Earthmen. If their intelligence, their socio-cultural level was so low as to make them fight all comers, then they must accept the consequences of the fight.

Which was what they were *not* doing now as Spear's jeep lunged among them. Parasites were scattered right and left along the narrow defile as the whining jet-propelled vehicle ploughed into them. Those that were not scattered by the jeep, stood and hopped madly and helplessly; unable—as Spear had imagined—to see what was hitting them. The long undisturbed peace of the defile had been burst asunder by something they could not see and could only feel when it hit them.

Beneath the tracks of the vehicle the plastic carapaces cracked and crunched.

Spear didn't like it. There was no element of sadism in his make-up. It was just a necessary evil, one of many he had come across during a lifetime of space work; the

kind of evil that Earth-lubbers would raise their arms at in protest—while they remained in their soft jobs on Earth. In space, on strange planets, one's ideas were adapted to the situation, without any grandiose nonsense about rights and privileges and moral obligations. If survival meant killing, then you killed. That way, man had reached out to the stars, just as centuries ago he had used the same tactics to reach unexplored, unexploited lands on Earth. In the rude, crude, basic stratagems of nature, there was no room for arbitration.

So the plastic carapaces crunched and cracked. And the jeep moved forward. And the parasites danced helplessly. And Spear's jaw was set in a firm, forcibly firm, thin line.

Suddenly, rounding a bend in the defile, Spear saw a house. But he no sooner saw it and glimpsed two figures—one a great deal like Manners—on the roof, than there was a terrific explosion and the whole place became utter chaos. Through it all he instinctively put the brake on. Then waited for it to clear.

Manners levelled the pistol at the parasite holding the drill and pulled the trigger—immediately there was a shattering explosion and a gush of wind that blew him off his feet.

Hastily scrambling up again, he saw that Aylees, too, had suffered from the blast. She was lying on the flat roof a few feet from him, covered in splashes of fluid. Suddenly, looking down at himself, Manners realised that he, too, was covered with fluid. What fluid? The thought raced through his mind at instinctive speed—and brought its answer almost as quickly. Obviously the parasites had been shattered by the explosion. Their carapaces had been broken and the hydrofluoric acid had shot out.

He didn't wait to ruminate on the chemical effects that that would produce on his skin. He picked up Aylees, who was beginning to stir sleepily, carried her across to the large plastic water tank and threw her in unceremoniously.

A second later he was in the tank himself, floundering about, rubbing his limbs and face to remove the corrosive acid.

A glance at Aylees showed him that the sudden immersion in cold water had brought back all her faculties. She had realised what had happened and was now busily rubbing herself down. Due to her scanty clothing, she had caught even more of the acid than Manners had. But then, the disadvantage was off-set by Manners' uniform being soaked with the stuff.

Under the water he peeled it off quickly, leaving just the shirt and shorts that were standard equipment for hot climes.

After one or two complete duckings to remove the acid from their hair, they climbed from the tank and stood looking at each other. For a moment, Manners forgot Aylees' telepathic gift and let his thoughts wander unchecked; she looked so beautiful in the afternoon sunlight, the drops of water running down her bare limbs. Then he noticed a faint, very faint, flush spreading over Aylees' features. Instantly he switched his thoughts to a somewhat less personal theme.

"We don't seem to have suffered too much, do we?" he commented, having noticed with relief that Aylees showed no horrible corroded patches on her skin. He looked down at himself and knew that he had had just as fortunate an escape.

"We were lucky," Aylees said. "First in not getting the acid in our eyes, and secondly in having that rain tank handy." She pursed her lips. "Now I shan't have anything to drink until we get another downpour!"

"Oh, well," Manners returned a trifle irritably, "there are worse problems than that. Let's go see what happened when Vesuvius blew up."

As they eased themselves towards the edge of the roof on their stomachs, Aylees commented on there being no acid on the plastic.

"Well," Manners explained, "HF boils at 19 degrees Centigrade and this roof is pretty near that, I should think. It must have evaporated in a very few minutes. Of course,

for the same reason it wouldn't have done us any really serious damage, but it would have been darned uncomfortable until it had evaporated—and would have disfigured us a little, too."

When they peered over the roof down towards the front door of the house, Aylees gave a little squeal of delight.

"They aren't drilling any more!" she cried. "You've got rid of them!"

She was right. The parasites weren't drilling any more. In fact, the parasites had all disappeared. Strewn around the doorway were many pieces of shattered carapaces, and here and there was a puddle of hydrofluoric acid that had not yet evaporated. But of parasites there was no sign.

Manners looked around with satisfaction. Suddenly he stiffened. Then let out a terrific whoop that made Aylees jump startledly.

"There he is!" Manners shouted. "Good old Shiny to the rescue! He's rescued us, instead of us rescuing him!"

Aylees followed Manners pointing hand and saw the tiny vehicle with the man seated in it. "Is that your friend?" she asked.

But Manners was too much engrossed in shouting greetings to Shiny Spear to heed her question. Philosophically, she sat down on the roof, letting her legs dangle and remained silent while Manners and Spear exchanged whoops, catcalls and ribaldry. The men on her own planet, it would seem, were much like Earthmen.

At length Manners turned his smiling face down to her. "Isn't that just wonderful?" he asked. "Fancy old Shiny turning up like this! And I was getting scared about him!"

Aylees looked up and forced a smile. "Wonderful," she said, "but why doesn't he come here?"

The smile left Manners' face slowly, as if the idea had never entered his head. "Eh?" he said.

Aylees scrambled impatiently to her feet, trying hard to keep down the irritation that was rising in her breast. "I mean, why does he stay out there? He's got a vehicle,

hasn't he? Why doesn't he drive it over here? If it didn't do anything else it would do away with the need for shouting!"

"I—er—yes, of course, you're right," Manners agreed. "Yes, of course. Slipped my mind, you know. I—er—"

He ended lamely, broke it off quickly and turned again towards Spear. "Hey, Shiny!" he called. "Come on over here, there's a lady I want you to meet!"

The answer, faint and laconic, came back instantly:

"My respects to the lady (lucky dog), and my apologies. The darned jeep's been busted by these parasites!"

CHAPTER TEN

The Parasites Awake

MANNERS instantly realised what had happened. Even with the naked eye he could see that a large pool of fluid remained around the base of the jeep. Evidently it had corroded the driving tracks until they were no longer fit for locomotion.

He turned to Aylees and sighed. "You see? He had a good reason for not coming over here sooner. The darned jeep's busted!"

Aylees, the universal femininity personified, looked hardly mollified at that. "Well, we'd better do something about it hadn't we?" she said, with obvious restraint. "I see no future in remaining up here on the roof."

Manners began to revise some of his ideas about the charming Aylees. Under duress, it seemed, she reacted much like the Earth women he knew—and *they* had been acting in the same way for centuries.

"It isn't true!" Aylees suddenly cried, betraying her use of telepathy. "It's not duress that's done it—it's—oh, perhaps I'm not so different after all—it's because I was proved wrong about your friend not coming here sooner. There, at least I have the grace to admit it!"

Manners smiled. "Yes, indeed. And for that, one can forgive a lot. Now then. Let's be friends again and start demolishing your house."

Aylees stared at him, uncertain whether to smile or to take him seriously. "Demolish the house? Why d'you want to do that?"

"You won't be needing it any more, if all goes well—or even if all doesn't go well. And we can make a few plastic stepping stones to get away from this darned fluid." He spat the last words out as a kind of sop to his ego for

having to resort to such primitive methods as stepping stones. "If only we had a few machines!" he burst out.

Aylees had grasped his earlier meaning immediately. She was now swinging herself down through the hole in the roof. "Never mind," she comforted. "We'll make do. There's a crowbar gun in my space suit. Unfortunately the power's run out, so you'll have to work it by hand. Feel up to it?"

Manners followed her through the hole and dropped down into the room beneath. "Just show me the crow-bar," he replied. "I'll supply the power!"

Aylees led him into the next room and removed the crowbar from the belt of her space suit. Manners took it, felt its weight in his hand, nodded satisfaction and went down the stairs.

"Anything I can do?" Aylees called, following him.

"Sure. Stand by for when I've broken the pieces off and then lay them down outside. Make a straight line towards the jeep and then farther on if there's any fluid about. The first thing we must do after getting old Shiny out of his fix is to get across to the stone before those darned parasites wake themselves up again."

He set to with the crow-bar on the front door. Aylees stood by and steadied the structure as he loosened it. "You think they *will* wake themselves up again, then?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. D'you have snails or hedgehogs or such like on your home planet? Sort of, eh? Well, don't they draw themselves up and seem to die when attacked? Then when things quieten down again, out they come, large as life."

Aylees glanced away towards the open spaces among the hills. She seemed a little apprehensive. "Of course, they often disappear like this," she said. "I've no idea where they go. Never had the desire to find out. I imagine they find themselves little niches among the 'rocks' and sleep off the meal of stone they've just had."

Manners looked up from his levering for a moment and stared at the broken carapaces that littered the ground in

front of the house. "I shouldn't think they're sleeping at the moment," he suggested.

Aylees followed his glance. "Oh, I don't know. They're not very intelligent, you know."

Manners didn't answer. He prised the front door loose and let Aylees take it away. It was quite light, but very strong. He began to attack the nearby segment of the house wall, watching Aylees as she laid the flat sheet down over the pools of corrosive fluid. He realised suddenly that the presence of the pools had been worrying him in a nagging sort of way ever since he'd seen them from the roof. Now he knew why—and knew the answer at once, too. He had been worried why the pools hadn't evaporated like those which had formed on the roof. Now he saw the reason—the house threw a great shadow in front of it, keeping the direct rays of the sun from the pools. On the roof, the direct sunlight had soon raised the fluid's temperature enough to affect the vaporisation rate.

Manners' own temperature began to rise as his muscles forced the sharp point of the crow-bar into the narrow crevices between the sheets. He began to wonder whether Aylees was right about their intelligence—the parasites. They seemed to have made a very good job of building the house. Still, that might be some sort of instinct, such as the termites had, guided by Aylees' prompting.

Another and another sheet came down. As they came, so Aylees took them and laid them one after the other in a straight line towards the jeep, in which she could see Spear sitting in what looked like a patient pose. Each time she straightened up from her task, she waved to him, received a wave back, and picked the little jealous twinge that passed through Manners' mind as he noticed the exchange of greetings.

At length, half the distance to the jeep had been covered. Manners dropped the crow-bar and straightened up, rubbing his back. "I don't think we'll dig out any more," he said. "If we pick up the first sheet as we step on to the

second and so on, we can use the ones we've already got for laying down beyond the jeep."

Aylees thought that was a good idea. They stepped on to the first sheet, then to the second. Manners picked up the first sheet and began to walk towards the other end of the line. He hadn't taken more than three steps, with Aylees bending to pick up the second sheet, when a whirlwind of glistening plastic surrounded him, knocking him to the ground and forced the breath from his body. What happened to the sheet he was carrying he never knew.

Almost as soon as he touched the ground, he was lifted from it again by several hard, plastic covered arms. Borne aloft, he could see that the parasites had indeed woken themselves up. Thousands of them had suddenly appeared, moving with tremendous speed. Over his shoulder and through a dozen or two flailing arms, he could see that Aylees, too, had been captured and was being carried after him. Stretching his neck, he saw that another mob of parasites was milling around the jeep. Spear was standing up in the driving seat, pondering at the creatures with his fists.

Just before Manners was dragged out of line of sight, he saw Spear lose his balance and topple over among the eagerly waiting parasites.

Then his mind was filled with his own affairs. The parasites were carrying him and Aylees through a hole in the plastic hills—a sort of cave. The light faded, but it was still a long way from total darkness. The transparent plastic allowed a fair quantity of sunlight to streak through it, creating a murky atmosphere that was in some ways worse than darkness.

Deeper and deeper into the hills they went, a milling, jostling mob of scurrying parasites, with their two victims held triumphantly aloft.

Suddenly they broke upon a wide, hollow cavern and were hurried across to the other side. There, on what seemed a specially prepared platform, sat a massive para-

site, fully ten times the size of the others. The mob came to a halt in front of the great beast, holding out Manners and Aylees as though they were sacrificial offerings.

Manners knew too much to try to escape from the clutches of his bearers. He saw Aylees struggling frantically beside him, and called out to her to stop.

"Save your strength," he said. "You're only wasting it now. What would you do if you got free? You'd never get away from these thousands."

Aylees went limp at his words. Manners could see that she was badly frightened. He wondered why. Spacemen tend to lose the faculty of fear and replace it with a constant alertness that is comforting even in moments of dire peril; watchful always for the chance of escape. That was how he felt now. Not afraid of the parasites. Just filled with disgust at letting himself be caught like that, and turning over in his mind all the possible avenues of escape. He wondered why Aylees wasn't the same—she had been in space a good deal—

And then he knew why: she had probably seen what these creatures had done to her family on the space ship. And it had probably been a sobering sight.

He tried to comfort her, found the words difficult to come by. Mostly, in these sorts of circumstances there was just him and Spear. There was no need to comfort each other. Aylees must have picked up his thoughts.

"Don't try, then," she said. "So long as I know that you want to, that's good enough. I feel better already!"

Manners looked back at the great hulking parasite and wished that *he* did. "Any idea where we are?" he asked her.

"None whatever," she answered. "I never knew this place existed—and as for that monstrosity, it's like something out of a bad dream."

"Tis, too," Manners agreed. "What d'you suppose it is?"

"Perhaps I can help," Aylees replied. "I can pick up their thought processes quite well. It's a sort of queen.

You know those things you have on Earth, what are they called—ants?—yes, ants. Well, this is like their queen. All she does is sit there and bud. That way they get their youngsters. Of, course, they feed her well, and venerate her a great deal. That's why we've been brought to her. They're asking her what they should do with us."

"Asking her?" Manners repeated. "How do they manage that?"

"It's their front legs, or arms, if you like. They wave them in patterns a sort of semaphore."

Manners nodded. He had come across similar modes of communication on other planets.

"Have you—er—have you any idea what her highness's suggestions are with regard to our fate?" he asked.

Even as he asked the question, he could see that Aylees' face had whitened considerably, and one hand was reaching out to him automatically as she stared at the 'queen.' He leaned over and took the hand. Its fingers were clammy with sweat.

"She says—she says we may prove a valuable source of food. She says we must be—must be embedded in plastic and preserved for future need!"

Manners shivered slightly. Into his mind came a picture of the biological museum on board the big ship. Rows and rows of cases holding plastic cubes, spheres and rectangles, in each of which was embedded a specimen of some rare plant or small animal picked up on the big ship's travels—a perfect method of preservation: the specimens looked just as they did on the day they were caught, only they were dead.

He got a grip on himself. "Oh, well, we'll have to see if we can stop them doing that," he said, lightly. "When do they propose to start the process?"

But there was no need for her answer. Just as Aylees said "Immediately," so the bearers began to move towards a dark spot on the wall of the cavern.

In no time at all, the dark spot was reached, and turned out to be a doorway. Even as they were bundled through

the hole, Manners could* see that several parasites were at work making a door to fit. Maybe they weren't intelligent, but they certainly knew how to get things done!

Both he and Aylees were thrown roughly to the ground inside the cavern. Scrambling to their feet, they saw that the doorway was crowded with the creatures, massed to bar their escape. Manners began to wish he had brought the spit-pistol with him; he had left it on the roof in the hurry of getting to Spear. Definitely the presence of Aylees was robbing him of his spaceman's training.

Things looked pretty hopeless when a few moments later, the parasites withdrew, while others placed the newly made door in position and sealed it.

Things looked absolutely hopeless when, a few moments later still, a thin trickle of plastic began to ooze beneath the door.

With his foot hard down on the brake, Spear waited for the chaos about him to clear a little. One moment there had been the milling, but orderly, mob of parasites, next there had been the explosion.

Now he could see that the parasites were in full retreat, scattering to the right and left, leaving what looked very much like a pile of wrecked bodies in front of the house. And along the previously plain plastic surface, swept a small tide of the glairy black fluid that Spear associated with the parasites' internal anatomy.

Lifting his eyes once more to the house, he saw that the figures had disappeared—or had they not been there at all? Still he sat there, trying to make some sense of it, not wanting to go farther, towards the house in case another explosion occurred.

Then a movement caught his eye. The figures were back again. He could see them plainly, peering over the edge of the roof. Reaching for his tiny telescope, Spear trained it on the figures, sat up with a jerk. It was Manners all right.

But the man was dressed in soaking wet shirt and shorts

and beside him was—Spear focused desperately—a soaking girl in a two-piece sun suit! Even from that distance and with a certain amount of spherical aberration in the telescope, Spear could tell that the girl was worth looking at. In fact, after the first hasty glance, Spear didn't look at Manners any more.

Then he pulled himself together and set his mind working on a different track. He saw the pair staring down at the front of the house, pointing and talking. He dropped the telescope back into its place and reached out for the starter knob. The jets purred softly into life. Letting in the clutch, Spear expected the jeep to move forward. Instead there was a little grunting noise from down below, but no forward movement at all.

He leaned over the side and stared at the tracks. His heart sank as he saw that the fluids had reached him, were swirling lazily round what was left of the tracks. The whole thing had been eaten away, suckers, wheels, tracks and all.

Then he raised his head as he heard a shout. Manners had seen him. He switched off the engine and stood up, suddenly forgetting the ruined drive. He answered Manners' shouts with louder shouts of his own, grinning and hurling friendly abuse, completely forgetful of the girl, who, he noticed idly, was now sitting on the roof and dangling her legs.

Manners turned away suddenly and looked down at the girl. She said something to him. After a moment's hesitation, Manners looked up again and called out:

"Hey, Shiny! Come on over here, there's a lady I want you to meet!"

Instantly, Spear answered him with a laconic drawl: "My respects to the lady (lucky dog), and my apologies. The darned jeep's been busted by these parasites!"

He saw Manners turn back to the girl, obviously explaining. They talked a short while and then disappeared. Minutes later they turned up at the door of the house, Manners seemed to be attacking the door with some sort of crow-bar. Spear sat back and waited for something

to happen. He wasn't going to step out into that fluid, even if his boots were thick. He only hoped something would happen before the fluid had eaten into the driving compartment.

He sat there watching the pair working, began to get the drift of what they were doing, saw the girl bring the door out and lay it down on the ground. He wondered where the blazes she had come from. It was just like Manners to be carried off into a parasites' nest and then find a lively, lovely girl waiting for him!

The minutes passed by. Sheet after sheet was laid. Each time the girl laid one down, she looked up and waved to him. Feeling a little silly, he waved back. He couldn't, after all, be unsociable!

He saw Manners down tools and straighten up. A little later, the pair of them started out across the stepping sheets they had made.

A little later still, chaos returned—in the form of a flaying mob of parasites. He saw them surround Manners and pick him up, then they did the same to the girl. Not three seconds later, they were all around the jeep, flailing their arms at him.

The sight of Manners being carried away helplessly by the mob had aroused a fierce anger within him. He stood up in the jeep and pounded at the parasites with his fists, knocking them away left and right. He ignored the pain in his knuckles where they came sharply against the hard plastic, concentrating only on lashing out at the grasping claws that stuck out from the ends of the arms.

One creature came very near, its claws snapping at Spear's legs. He bent down and aimed a vicious swipe at the creature and had the satisfaction of seeing it reeling back among its fellows before he lost his balance and toppled down off the jeep among them.

He had expected to be immediately torn to pieces by the claws, or dowsed from head to foot in corrosive fluid. Instead, the creatures merely grasped him firmly and started to carry him away as they had done with Manners and the

girl. At the same time, another group of them surrounded the jeep, hooked their claws on it and with a combined effort, lifted it off the ground. The jeep-bearers fell in behind the main party.

Spear, though held so firmly that he could hardly move, could see that he was being carried towards a dark spot in the hills, which very soon turned out to be an entrance into the place. He was borne through among crowds of jostling parasites, who milled around his bearers in the attitudes of supporters.

The light began to fade and grow murky as he was moved deeper into the hills. All around him were the parasites, the narrow path into the hills chock full of the creatures.

Then the path opened out into a wide cavern, dark and gloomy. At the opposite side of it, in the direction he was being carried, was a high plastic platform. Spear caught a glimpse of Manners being carried through a doorway. Then he saw the creature on the platform. He swallowed twice and wondered if it were real. In form it resembled the parasites all around him, but it was huge—ten times the size of his bearers.

The creatures dragged him across to the great beast and came to a halt in front of it. The jeep was brought in, too, and placed to one side.

Then nothing seemed to happen. All Spear could see was the parasites around him, waving their front arms, the creature on the platform doing the same. Not a sound was to be heard.

Spear, in spite of the drama of the situation, was beginning to get bored, when suddenly a whole bunch of parasites moved over to the platform and surrounded the huge creature. Gently, they placed their claws around it, strained and lifted. The massive beast was passed gingerly down from group to group until it reached the level of the ground. Then, it slowly moved towards Spear.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Joy Ride in Reverse

FEELING his nerve beginning to give way, Manners wrenched his gaze away from the trickle under the door and glanced round the chamber. Aylees was close against him, his arm round her waist, one of her hands clutching his shirt.

The chamber was small and murky. The walls were sheer transparent plastic, getting darker towards the sides, lighter towards the roof. But even up there, where freedom obviously lay nearest, he could see the roof was thick and would yield only to such a tool as a crow-bar, which he hadn't got. He consoled himself by thinking that it would have taken hours anyway.

He felt Aylees shiver. The trickle under the door was growing to a sizable stream. Evidently the parasites had some method of stopping their secretions solidifying before they wanted it to.

"I was wrong," Aylees said, in a low voice. "They *are* intelligent, Dirk. I—I underestimated them and—and got you into this mess."

Manners laughed, sincerely. "Don't worry yourself about that," he replied. "The only person who got me into this mess was me. I'm the one who volunteered for space research, not you. This is just a part of the job I chose. I made the choice, I have to put up with it. I can't blame anybody else."

Aylees moved her large eyes round to him. "You are very brave," she said, almost with fervour.

At that, Manners laughed aloud. "Brave! My, oh my, if the Old Man heard that! And Shiny! You must tell that to Shiny—if we ever meet up with that crazy guy again," he added, remembering the way Spear had fought off the parasites and then tumbled down among them.

"Look," he went on. "There's nothing brave about me. Bravery is where a man feels scared, real scared, and goes on doing his job in spite of it. Me, I just don't scare, that's all. I do my job because I like it. Situations like this present a challenge. If I lose, well I lose. It just happens that I can only lose once."

He was smiling at her, his lips drawn back over even teeth, one eyebrow slightly raised, the picture of a Don Juan who has just landed safely on his senorita's balcony.

Aylees returned his smile. "Yes, Dirk," she said. "I see what you mean. I see it quite clearly."

The last word had a certain emphasis that made him wonder whether she was at work with her telepathy again, whether he hadn't convinced her after all, whether she knew that he was, in fact, very scared. But Aylees merely went on smiling and said nothing.

Manners turned back to the door. The viscid plastic was now moving towards them in a wide sheet across the floor of the chamber. Pretty soon it would reach their feet, then it would crawl up to their ankles, their knees, their—

Manners halted his train of thought suddenly. Then he broke into a wide smile, wider than his Gay Lothario one. Swiftly and impulsively he twirled Aylees round and kissed her. It took her by surprise, mainly because it wasn't a lovers' kiss, but an expression of sheer joy translated into physical terms.

"Aylees, my darling," Manners cried, "we've nothing to worry about—at least, only our feet!"

Aylees stared at him in mute enquiry.

"Don't you see?" Manners went on. "These things are not intelligent. You were right. You can't fill a room with fluid by running it in at the bottom—not unless you've

got a source of terrific pressure down at one end and a vent up top. It's physically impossible. What have we been scared about?"

Aylees took time off to say: "You told me you weren't scared."

Manners ignored the remark. "Now, it's just a question of keeping our feet out of the darned stuff until they stop trying to pump it in. They'll probably pump for a while and then go away, thinking they've done the job. Then we just wait a while and force our way out of here."

"How?" Aylees wanted to know.

Manners, who was a little hazy on details at the moment, sheered off that topic and went back to the question of feet.

"Lucky they put us in such a small room," he said. "Come over here." He led her, very much the strong man of action, to one side of the chamber. "Now lean your back against the wall and brace your feet against the other about three feet off the ground. That way we'll be quite safe."

Aylees could see that he was right. She did as he said, and they were very soon perched up beside each other between walls. Quietly discussing what they would do to get out of the place once the parasites had gone away.

As they talked, so the plastic sheet crept across the floor until it touched the wall opposite the door.

Manners noticed it. "Pretty soon we'll know if they tumble to their mistake," he said, nodding towards the sheet. "About this point, the plastic should start to run out the other side of the door as fast as they pump it in."

They went back to their plans. Aylees was pretty certain that the main chamber would never be left without some few parasites to watch over the 'queen.' Manners thought the great beast would want privacy sometimes. "She won't want her offspring to watch her budding *all* the time, surely. She must send them all off at times, so that she can—"

He broke off suddenly and frowned at the door, twisted his

head and appeared to be listening. Aylees asked him what was bothering him.

"Could have sworn I heard the purring of jeep-jets," he replied. "Oh, well, maybe I—there it is again! I'm sure that's the jets of our jeep!"

He had to force himself to remain wedged up on the wall. Every instinct bade him get down and investigate the sound. Then he blinked twice and pointed.

He had been staring at the door without seeing it. Now it had come into focus. And the smooth plastic sheet was buckling.

"Looks as though mother's little darlings have seen the error of their ways," he said, more lightly than he felt. "Here they come."

Spear felt himself shiver a little as the great beast approached him. It came lumbering over towards him like some mis-designed hippopotamus, huge, hostile and dumb.

As the creature approached, so Spear's bearers lowered him to the ground and moved back. He glanced round, saw that a solid wall of the creatures lay behind him, equally solid walls on either side. And dead ahead was the solidest of them all, moving up on him.

There was a weapon in his belt. Up till now he had been too firmly held to be able to use it. Now it lay within finger reach. His hand moved towards it slowly, reached the butt just as the massive parasite drew level with him. Then it stayed that way as Spear stared in astonishment while the giant creature moved on past him towards the jeep.

With a strong feeling of anti-climax, Spear let his hand fall away from the pistol and stared at the giant parasite. Suddenly Spear realised that these things probably talked with their arms, and that the large beast was following directions given it by the others.

That didn't seem to tie up with his previous ideas about the parasites being blind. Maybe they had some kind of

differential vision that let them see some things like their own waving limbs, but not others. For the Big Black Beast, as Spear mentally christened the large parasite, obviously couldn't see the jeep, yet it was big enough.

The lumbering animal moved in a series of short zigzags towards the jeep, bumped into it and came to a halt. Its forelimbs came up and moved all over the jeep. Then, to Spear's marked surprise, the creature climbed into the driving seat, although most of its body hung over the sides and back.

Spear stood there staring. This was something like a three-dim cartoon, and was almost as funny. He waited to see if the Big Black Beast would start to fiddle with the controls.

But it didn't. It just sat there and waited, waving its forelegs slowly in the air.

As soon as it was settled, other parasites moved up on Spear and began nudging him with their forelegs, pushing him nearer to the jeep.

At first, Spear couldn't see what they were getting at. Then it dawned on him. They wanted him to give the Big Black Beast a ride in the jeep!

Although the situation had its funny side, there were also its serious aspects, not least of which was Spear's inability to comply with their wishes. And even if he could drive the jeep, the heat from the jets would carve out a great slice from—

He brought the train of thought to a halt, switched it to another, closely allied. Then, with a slow, grim smile on his face, he stepped towards the jeep.

Spear glanced once towards the door through which he had seen Manners taken, noted that a sheet of plastic had been sealed up against the doorway and that a group of the smaller parasites was secreting plastic and forcing it under the door. The sight told him more or less what was in the minds of the parasites with respect to Manners and the

girl. And that was enough to quash any sentimental ideas he might have been entertaining.

As soon as he began to move towards the jeep, the nudging parasites desisted, leaving him free to make his own progress, being content to fall back into a barricade behind him. Somehow they must have acquired the power of seeing him, however vaguely they did it.

Coming up close to the jeep, Spear grabbed a fender and tried to move the vehicle. It wouldn't budge. He looked around helplessly. If only these things could talk. He decided he'd have to show them what he wanted. He moved away from the jeep.

Instantly, four parasites scuttled up to him and tried to force him back, childishly irritated at his refusal to comply with their wishes. Spear reached out both hands and grabbed a fore-leg each of two parasites and started to move back towards the jeep again. This time, after a short hesitation, the parasites were willing to be led.

Spear forced their fore-legs against the jeep and made a lifting movement. The parasites just stood there. The big one just sat there, waiting.

Again and again Spear tried. At length he succeeded inasmuch as the parasites began to lift the jeep on their own volition. Spear realised it would have been easier mechanically to have got the Big Black Beast out of the car first, but he hesitated at the diplomatic issues involved.

Anyway, the job was nearly done now. As soon as the jeep was clear of the floor, Spear nudged the parasites to move in a circle. After a while they caught on again and did as he indicated. The jeep was slewed round until the jets faced the door through which Manners had been carried. Then Spear made the parasites bring the car down to ground level again. With an eye to the future, he dismissed his helpers by giving them a push back towards their barricade.

Then he took in a deep breath, stole one quick glance at the parasites secreting their plastic under the door, and leaned inside the jeep. His fingers touched the starter knob.

twisted it, pulled it out to full power.

Instantly there was a subdued roar, soft and deceptively gentle to the uninitiated ear. At the same moment a gush of searing hot gas spurted forth from the jets, licked at the barricading parasites, grew in volume and intensity and shrivelled the creatures where they stood.

Pandemonium broke loose as the parasites realised what had happened. But it was too late. Once the starter knob reached full power, so the gases from the jets leapt out in a blazing fury, roaring devouringly towards the parasites who still secreted their plastic. Then they too went down into shrivelled, twisted plastic under the impact of the scorching flames.

Beyond them, the newly made door buckled, bent and began to droop. Spear had one look at his accomplishment before clawing hands once more scraped his flesh and hauled him into the air. This time he was not kept there, but dashed viciously to the ground, his shoulder jarring painfully against the hard plastic.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Beacon

THE shock of the impact travelled through Spear's body in a great wave of excruciating pain. He struggled to his feet, managed only to regain a stooping position under the hail of blows that came from the enraged parasites. Uppermost in his mind was the fact that the jeep's motor was still running.

In the open, he knew, the jets would not be terribly harmful, except to someone standing directly in their line and close to them. The hot gases would rapidly become dispersed in the air. But in that confined chamber, large as it was, the roaring gases spelt death to everyone if allowed to continue. More important, from Spear's point of view, the jets were aimed straight at the door of the chamber which held Manners and the girl. The job was done, the door was melted, but the jets would kill them if they weren't turned off pretty quick.

Fighting his way among the parasites, Spear moved up on the jeep. The parasites rained blow after blow on him, their hard plastic shells making cuts and bruises in the skin of his arms, face and back. He hunched his head down between his shoulders and forced himself right up to the jeep.

He reached out a hand and grabbed the starter lever. Instantly the roaring stopped. There was only the dull thuds as the blows continued to rain down. But at least the jets were off.

The strain of the unequal combat was beginning to tire Spear. His shoulders ached with the punishment they had

received from the parasites and from the efforts he had put behind his own blows. He kept his back to the jeep, flailing out with arms and legs, pulling the parasites down as they climbed the jeep behind him, hurling them out among their fellows, increasing their rage still more.

Suddenly he remembered the spit-pistol at his belt. Quickly removing a hand from the conflict he dropped it down and found that the weapon was still there. He closed his fingers round the butt, jerked it from its holster, his lips set firm in a grim straight line.

He had just raised the barrel and pointed it at the nearest parasite when a voice called out urgently:

"Don't, Shiny! For Pete's sake, don't!"

Spear reacted instantly, without question—the usual spaceman's reaction when in an emergency. Time to find out why later.

He used the pistol as a club and lashed out at his assailants, at the same time twisting his head in the direction of the voice. He was just in time to see Manners lowering the girl to the floor just outside the chamber with the ruined door. Then the parasites were on to them and they were lost from Spear's sight.

Now there was some definite line of action to take, Spear forced his muscles to superhuman efforts, battling his way across to where he had seen Manners and the girl. Right and left the parasites fell aside as he struck them, only to have their places taken by others.

They trampled on each other in their eagerness to get at him.

Bit by bit, Spear forced his way over. Three-quarters of the way he came across Manners suddenly. They must have been working towards each other. Both Manners and the girl were putting up a stiff fight against the creatures; and both of them bore the cruel marks of scraping claws. Spear came near to Manners. Without relaxing his efforts, he said:

"This can't last, Dirk. We're outnumbered by the thous-

and. Why not the pistol?"

Manners sent a parasite sprawling with a vicious kick of his heavy boot. "No," he gasped. "Cause an explosion. Shower us with their damned fluid." He despatched two more parasites with his fists. Blood was running freely from a wound on his face. "There are three of us," he went on. "And they are half blind. Make for the door."

Spear grunted, lashed out at a parasite that was closing its claws on Aylees. "How?" he said. "There's millions of 'em!"

"Back to the jeep. Start her up again. Carve out a slice towards the door, swivel the jeep and then run!"

Spear grunted agreement. He didn't think much of the idea, but it was about all they could do. He groaned as he thought of having to make his way back to the jeep again.

But he did it. By dint of tremendous effort, backed up by Manners' rearguard action, he reached the jeep. The Big Black Beast was no longer in position.

He threw himself against the vehicle and got it turned to face opposite the door. Then, with blows raining down on his back that Manners couldn't stop, he leaned inside the vehicle and started the motor, pulled the knob to full power.

Speed was of the essence, he knew. He snatched a quick glance at the door, saw that a wide swathe had been cut through the ranks of parasites, and immediately threw himself against the jeep again. This time the searing jets curved round in a graceful arc, cutting down the parasites as they milled about. Almost the full circle Spear pushed the jeep, until only those parasites in the immediate vicinity survived. Then he left the motor running and joined Manners and Aylees in their flight to the door.

The heat of the jets had raised the temperature of the chamber considerably; there was no fluid on the floor to bar their progress. They hurtled forward, pursued by the remaining parasites, some three or four dozen.

Out through the doorway they streaked and along the defile between the hills. The afternoon sun was low and the light was fading, but even so their vision was better than that of the parasites, who raced about like blind things. Manners, watching them over his shoulder, could see how the increase in illumination from the dark chamber had ruined practically all the vision they had got. But they were still a foe to be reckoned with—as he realised when one of them stumbled into Aylees and brought her toppling to the ground.

He kicked at it savagely, sent it flying, and helped Aylees to her feet, then ran on, dragging the girl behind him. Every now and then, he or Spear stopped, turned and delivered a vicious blow at a parasite that had caught them up. Still the creatures pursued—it seemed almost to have become an instinctive part of their behaviour pattern.

They reached the end of the hills, hurried through the foothills and out on to the plain plastic surface that led to the rocks beyond. Here they were at an advantage, because the parasites had no means of telling where they were. Back in the defile there had been only a limited field to forage, now there was the whole surface spread out before them.

Glancing back, Spear saw that they were dealing with the problem by spreading out fanwise and advancing in a line, running backwards and forwards to meet each other as they did so, their motion being a curious combination of forward and sideways movement.

It was pretty effective, and if only they could have done it faster, they would have been sure to catch up. But Spear saw that they were lagging behind bit by bit.

By the time the two men and Aylees reached the edge of the stone, there was a fairly large distance between them and the pursuing parasites. They pulled up, panting, and, at the point of exhaustion, they flopped down on to the smooth stone.

No one spoke for some seconds. They simply listened to

each other's harsh breathing, felt clearly for the first time the numerous cuts and bruises they had acquired in the fight. All three of them were covered with tiny rivulets of blood, in places drying, in other places mingling with the sweat that streamed from them. All three kept their eyes on the advancing parasites, trying to judge how long they could rest before beginning their flight again.

"Jeepers!" said Spear, "what a planet!"

"What a narrow escape is more like it," Manners puffed. He stole a glance at Aylees. The girl was obviously hurt more by the appearance of her cuts than by the pain they caused. He tried to make light of it. "Aylees has come out of it pretty well, hasn't she!" he laughed.

Spear slewed his head round, stared at the bloody, sweaty image that a while back was a beautiful girl and was about to answer when he caught on to Manners' intention.

"Sure thing," he said, quickly. "You'd think she'd come straight from a beauty parlour!"

Strangely enough, Aylees immediately burst into tears, to the consternation of the Earthmen. Then Manners realised she was probably using her telepathy again and finding out what Spear really thought. He was about to try some soothing remark when a loud wail sounded. The stone had sensed the approaching parasites.

All three jumped to their feet instantly, Aylees trying to stem her flow of tears, the men staring out across the plastic to where the parasites were indeed getting near.

"Better get moving again," Spear said. "All set?" He stared up at the nearest monolith and shouted irritably. "Oh, for Jupiter's sake, stop that hollering! They're after us, not you!"

"Oh, oh!" the monolith wailed babyishly. "You've brought them back to me! You've set them on to me! Oh, oh!"

The three humans moved off away from the plastic surface. They had no idea where they were going; the ship was out of sight behind the distant monoliths. As they

went, Spear remonstrated with the stone.

"Look, here," he said, "we didn't bring them. They followed us. Here we are practically in ribbons from their darned claws and you start saying we set them on to you. Now pull yourself together and show us where the ship is. We've wiped out practically the whole colony of parasites for you, what else can you expect?"

"You have betrayed my trust," the nearest monolith answered unreasonably. "You have brought them to me again, just when I thought that—aaaaa!"

It ended with a great, long drawn out wail. Evidently the parasites had arrived at the stone. Spear called a halt.

"We may as well wait a bit," he said to Manners. "The parasites are a long way off, and we can't find our way to the ship without the stone's help—and I reckon we won't be getting that for a while."

They all three flopped down on the stone again. The stone's wails sounded loud in their ears, but the sheer joy of remaining motionless was enough for them. Night was coming down once more and apart from the wailings, things were reasonably peaceful.

"What would I do for a can of iced beer!" Spear said, suddenly, moving his parched tongue inside his parched mouth. "Oh, well, that comes later. Suppose you tell me what's been happening, and where this delightful young lady comes from."

Manners laughed and formally introduced Aylees as a visitor from a foreign planet, name and location unknown. Then he unfolded the story of what had happened in the house and up until they had heard the jets and seen the door buckling.

"It got pretty hot, I can tell you," he went on. "I was beginning to wonder whether you'd ever turn the darned things off! Then you did, and I decided to risk having my boots clogged with plastic. I picked up Aylees and carried her out. What happened after that you must be fairly familiar with!"

Spear was about to answer when the ground gave way beneath them and they all sank below the surface.

"Scramble out, quick!" Spear shouted. "Quick, I say!"

They didn't hesitate to follow his instructions. Spear was up and out first, pulling at Aylees, while Manners dragged himself over the edge. The stone's voice gloated over them.

"So, Earthmen, I use the trick you taught me on you! The parasites are gone. I ditched them again. I, the great stone creature, wonder of the universe! And now I ditch you!"

But its geometry had got a little mixed, for instead of creating another pit, it sent up a column of stone with the three humans on top of it.

"Down," Spear shouted.

But his directions were not needed. As soon as the stone began to rise, so Manners and Aylees rolled themselves over the edge and back on to level ground. No sooner had Spear landed beside them than another pit appeared and they had to scramble out again.

By now the stone was shrieking with insensate laughter, a horrible sound, quite unlike human mirth. Pits and mounds appeared everywhere. The humans had to scramble up and roll down at lightning speed to avoid being carried far below the crust or pushed high above the surface.

They dodged about erratically, with no set purpose, no set direction, simply and instinctively keeping on the move.

Movement became agony. Every bending of the arm, every flexing of the leg sent shivers of pain through them. Their movements became slower and slower, until they could hardly reach the edge of the pits before the bottom had sunk too far.

In between whiles they lay prostrate on the ground, simply waiting in grinding agony for the next pit or the next column. And as they lay and scrambled and rolled, so night fell in upon them.

Suddenly, Manners raised himself on one arm and shouted

hoarsely. "The beacon! Shiny, the beacon!"

Spear slewed his head round painfully, stared in the direction Manners was pointing. His response was an incoherent gurgle of appreciation.

The ship's automatic beacon was shining out just a little way from them, behind some monoliths.

Manners haltingly and hoarsely explained its meaning to Aylees. The sight of it seemed to endow them with new strength. They raised themselves and made their painful way towards the shining light, scrambling from pits and rolling from columns almost blindly, their eyes fixed on the beacon ahead.

At length they came round a monolith and faced their ship. It was tilted at a crazy angle by one of the stone's crazy columns. But it was still standing, and still a welcome sight.

They groped their way towards it, high excitement coursing through their veins, reached it and lay there on the ground staring up at the still-open outer hatchway, their eyes glazed with thanksgiving.

Then came the agonising process of climbing up into the hatchway. Manners tried it first, but fell back to the ground, unable to make the effort of raising himself a few feet. Spear tried, and succeeded. He leaned down and pulled up Aylees, whom Manners had pushed forward, pulled her up and let her fall sideways into the air-lock. Then he reached down again and gave a hand to Manners.

Spear seemed to have got some kind of third wind. He dragged the other two into the interior of the ship, sealed the outer door, and then dragged them into the control room. It was built for two. That meant someone had to go without a mattress for the take-off. Silently, Spear strapped Aylees down in one, motioned Manners to get on to the other.

The navigator demurred, but Spear insisted, tying the man down himself to make sure. Then he went over to the

control set, sat himself in the chair and took a deep breath. He looked over his shoulder, forced a smile.

"Soon, Aylees," he said, "you can use your telepathic gift on the Old Man—for the exclusive benefit of Manners and me! And if he's thinking of sending us to another sterile planet with a new form of life, just let us know. We'll do the rest!"

He winked at Manners, turned his back and shouted to them to take the strain. Then he reached out and pulled the firing pin. The ship shook, rocked and lifted.

As Spear gritted his teeth against the agony of the acceleration, a part of his mind was thinking just how awkward unintelligent creatures could be."

THE END

All characters in this story are imaginary and no reference is intended to any living person. (Copyright, 1952.)

projectiles (2)

CLUB ?

I recently read, and immensely enjoyed, Nos. 18 and 20. I am writing to ask if there is a science fiction club. Could you let me know, as I am rather interested in this type of book.

GRAHAM T. HOWARD,
8 Whitson Place,
Ridgefield Road,
Oxford.

If you get hold of our No. 21, Graham, you will find there a list of British clubs. But you will no doubt be hearing from some of them soon after this is printed!

DISPELLED

Any doubts conjured up by H.J.C.'s recent story (*Chaos in Miniature*) as to whether he could give up his unusual style of writing in favour of the more conventional type, have been completely dispelled by his latest novel *Mice or Machines!* Congratulations on a splendid story, and a superb cover to go with it. H.J.C. deserves to rank with Rayner and Tubb, but we'll have to wait and see if he can keep it up. The story was really worth reading, and once I had started I could not put it down. Your stories have improved from about No. 14 onwards, until now the only criticism I have is that you always have one long novel. Couldn't you split the magazine into two novelettes or something once in a while?

JOHN CUTTERIDGE,
61 Hawkins Road,
Shoreham-by-Sea.

Many thanks for your compliments, John. With regard to our single criticism, see our Editorial this month. Write again,

ALL THE BEST

I have now read two of your publications, 16 and 17, and must say that I enjoyed them very much. Science fiction books are few and far between out here. Up till now I have had to rely on old American pre-war issues that I managed to dig up. I would like to wish you and your publication all the best and hope that we can see more of them.

R. E. PATE,
9a Neville Rd.,
Thebarton, Australia.

Thanks for the best wishes, Mr. Pate. And we're glad that we are supplying you with that traditional need, the LONG-FELT WANT! We are getting an increasing number of admirers in your country and we are very proud of it.

COLLECTOR'S PLEA

I am endeavouring to get together my own science fiction library and am asking for your help.

I have tried to make contact with science fiction booksellers, but because we are a long way away down here they don't seem to realize the want for such books.

However, if you could send me a catalogue of science fiction books and some information on how to join a fan club, I would be very grateful.

M. POULL,
Savoy Hotel,
Perth, W. Australia.

Catalogue and addresses of fan-clubs in your part of the world duly sent, Maurice. Let's hope that the booksellers "Down-under" awaken to the growing demand fairly quickly. They're missing out on a pretty good thing!

s-f handbook

Terms of interest to science-fictioners

Half-life—Time required for the radioactive decay of one half of any mass of a radioactive element.

Harvest Moon—The Moon, in September, rises almost at the same time each evening, so that the nights are well-lit at harvest time.

Heat—The energy represented by a substance's molecular movement. Increase in movement is increase in heat and vice-versa. Temperature is a measurement of this in degree of molecular movement.

Helium—An inert, rare gas, one part of which occurs in 200,000 parts of our atmosphere. Helium is peculiar in that at temperatures near absolute zero, it appears to behave independently of gravity—climbing the sides of its container and falling over the rim.

Heavy-water—Water composed of ordinary oxygen and heavy hydrogen (deuterium). Sometimes called deuterium oxide.

Heavside layer—(Ionosphere). A band in the upper atmosphere from 38 to 185 miles above sea-level. Consists mainly of ionised particles, which reflect long radio waves and make world-wide radio communication possible.

Heterodyne—The superimposition of two waves of different frequencies to produce a beat effect. A means of changing the frequency of an alternating current.

Homologues—Developmental equivalents. The Eustachian tube, for example, is homologous with the first gill cleft in fishes, having been derived from them by evolution.

Hormones—Endocrine gland (thyroid, adrenal, etc.) productions that play an important part in regulating bodily functions such as growth. Essential to health, sometimes to life.

Hydrogen—Lightest substance known. A gas, the diatoms of which consist of one proton and one electron.

Hydroponics—Soil-less cultivation of plants. The roots are submerged in a solution containing only those nutrients required by the particular plant. In most cases, superior to cultivation in soil.

Hygroscopic—Any substance that tends to absorb water from the air is hygroscopic. Examples: Calcium chloride, Lime, Silica gel. May be used in space-ships to remove breathed-out water from the atmosphere.

Hyperbola—A curve resulting when a cone is cut along a plane that makes a larger angle with the base than that made by the side of the cone. Path followed by a body projected from a planetary surface at greater than escape-velocity speed.

H.J.C.

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BE A MASTER OF JU-JITSU



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WOT NO LUCK!



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In several million booklets you may have read extracts from testimonials received from as far back as 1930. We just take them at random. We possess more than TWELVE THOUSAND unedited testimonials, and we know from chance remarks that many who swear by Joan, never trouble to report to us. Having so many we can't possibly publish them all, nor can we conveniently be changing our advertisements and we have been content to keep to those originally published, but such is the immense interest being displayed we thought we would depart from our rule in a small measure and just publish 6 or 7 of the huge number that came in during 1945. Remember similar testimonials have been coming in unceasingly since 1930.

NEVER WITHOUT MONEY

"I received one of your histories about three weeks ago and it has brought me luck. Before I received your book I was always without money, but now, thanks to you, I am never without money! (Mrs.) G. O., Glos. 8.10.45"

INCREASE IN WAGES

"... already after one fortnight we have had luck. I won ... sum of £30 ... also have got a 1/- per week increase in wages unexpected so Joan the Wad must be our lucky Star. So please send Jack O'Lantern to make the pair complete. (Mrs.) D. M., Kirkstall, Leeds. 19.11.45"

LOST HIS JOAN—LOST HIS LUCK

"Please let me know how much to send for Joan the Wad and Jack O'Lantern. I had them both in 1931, but somehow lost them in hospital two years ago. I can honestly say that since losing them nothing has seemed to go right with me. I know what good luck Joan can bring by honest facts I have really experienced. ... I certainly know that Joan the Wad is more than a lucky charm. (Mr.) E. B. S., Liphook, Hants. 10.11.45"

HOMELISS

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"... two of my friends have won £500 each since receiving your pamphlets and another has married an American millionaire. ... Please forward me one Joan the Wad and one Jack O'Lantern. C. E., Levensham, 3.11.45"

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"My dear Joan ... She has brought me continual good luck and her influence spreads to every sphere ... I have got a much better job ... greater wages ... less working hours ... and my health has greatly improved. I have always been a lonely kind of person, but ... a friend of the opposite sex, she is also lonely ... great opportunity for comradeship offered. So you see how the influence of Joan works. My pockets have always been full and I have had many wishes and desires fulfilled. ... I would not put just Joan for her wealth in gold, she is much too valuable in every way. Her power extend all over the world, and she works unceasingly for the full benefit of her friends and all people. Nice rides in my pocket day and night and never leaves me. ... D. H., Leeds, 9. 11.45"

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Dear Sirs,

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G.A.S., Ossett, Yorks

Dear Sirs,

I am very pleased with my APAL. I have been much better in health since using it. It certainly takes away the longing for a smoke. Thanking you very much.

Mrs. C.A.H., Coventry

Dear Sirs,

Fifty cigarettes a day for over twenty years is pretty good going and nobody would have me believe that I could ever give it up. Your APAL arrived four and a half weeks ago and I am delighted to say that I have not smoked since.

F.F., Hertford.

Dear Sirs,

I bought an APAL from you nearly eighteen months ago, and it did for me all that you said it would. I have not smoked for seventeen months, and have no desire at all to do so.

G.H., Marham, Norfolk

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HEALTH CULTURE ASSOCIATION

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